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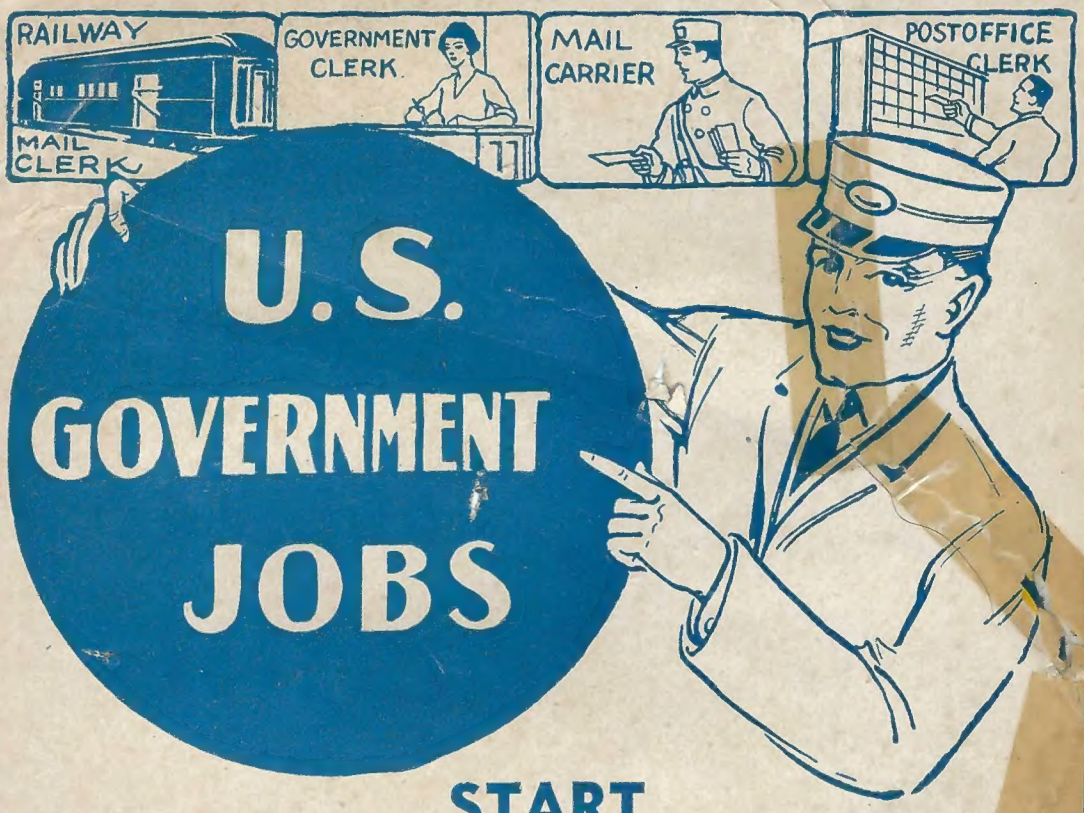
COMPLETE COWBOY NOVEL

Magazine

STAR TOTER

ARCHIE JOSCELYN'S
LATEST COMPLETE
BOOK-LENGTH
NOVEL



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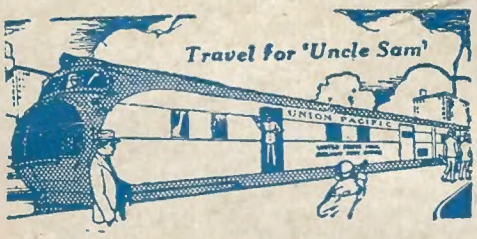

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COMPLETE
COWBOY NOVEL Magazine

Volume 9, Number 1
October, 1949

BRAND NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

Star Toter

By ARCHIE JOSCELYN 8

"You've worn a lawbadge before, Locke, and we like your reputation. Now you'll wear our badge, and rod the law our way — or we'll let out what we know about your father and your worthless brother!"

SHORT STORIES

THE DEAD LAUGH LAST ..... Mike Bienstock 78
— even when there's no chance for the living!

SMILIN' BILLY RIDES WITH CURLY BILL
..... Harold Preece 84
A true story of a famous lawman and outlaw.

THE DECOY ..... E. E. Clement 87
They were hunting Killer Kubilius, and Kubilius was right in plain sight, waiting for them!

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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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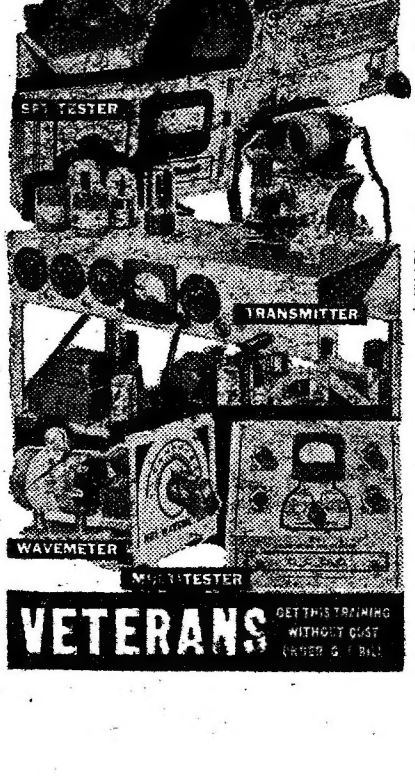

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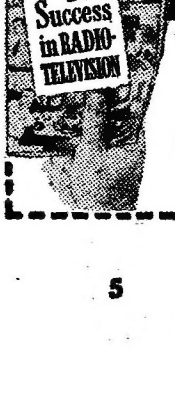
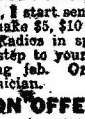


I TRAINED THESE MEN



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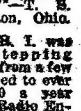

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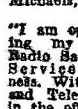

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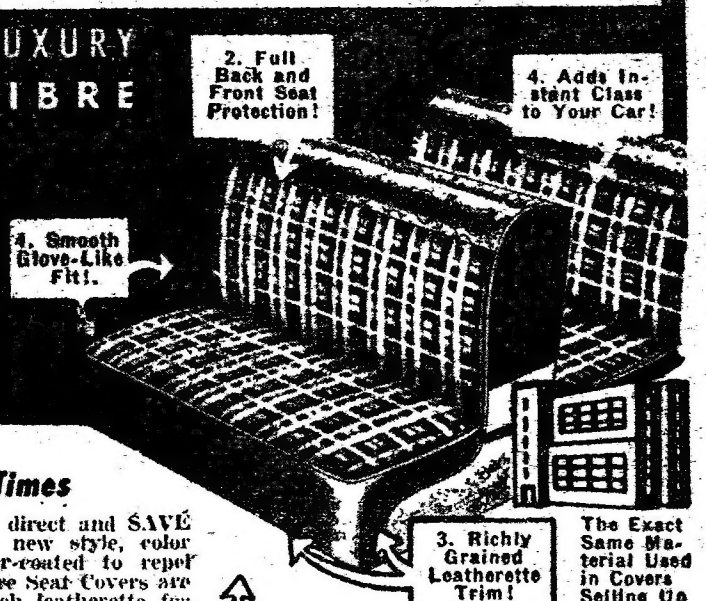
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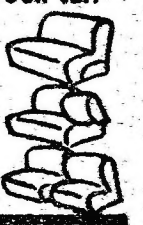

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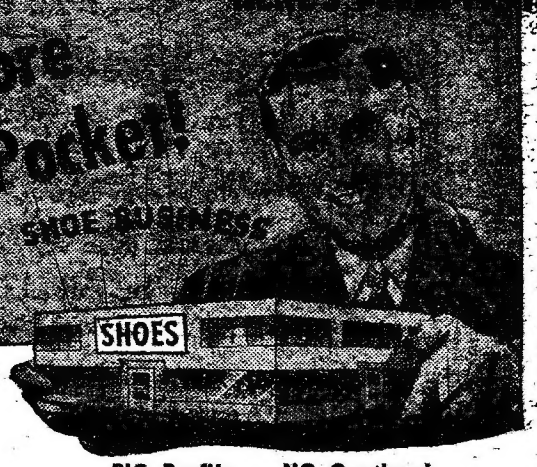

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Gunswift New Book-Length Novel

by ARCHIE JOSCELYN

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"You're over a barrel, Mr. Locke, we know your reputation, and you're just the man we want to wear the law badge in Highpoint. Only you'll rod the law our way, not as you've done in the past. And if you tend to forget your place, just remember that we can still prove your father a murderer and your brother a swindler!"

They were using Jinny for a shield . . .

FLETCHER BANNON was drowning his sorrow in Kirke's dingy saloon when Locke returned to Highpoint. Bannon had been immersing his woes at the same table when Locke had seen him last, seven years before.

For a moment, Locke stood, unnoticed—a tall man, who at first glance seemed too thin for his height, too finely drawn to a whip-cord hardness. Skin deep tanned by much sun and wind, eyes like the glint of light along the polished barrel of one of the forty-fives which he carried at either hip. There was a sprinkling of gray showing at the edges of his dark hair, and his mouth looked as though laughter had long been foreign to it.

The man he looked upon, maudlin in his glass, was ageless. Time had placed no lines in his face, no fat on his comfortably-fed frame. It had failed even to glaze his eyes, though beer had had its effect. His sandy hair was thick, unchanged in color. No one would have suspected that Dr. Fletcher Bannon had been in his thirties the day he had first set foot in Highpoint, or that that day had been nearly three decades forgotten.

Bannon lifted his head, blinked, then came lightly to his feet, hand outstretched. "Orin Locke, as I'm a sinner!" he exclaimed. "Man, it's good to see you again!"

Locke's frosty eyes warmed. For a moment the two men clasped hands silently, then Locke sank into the chair which Bannon kicked toward him. "You're like Ben Bolt, Fletcher," he said finally. "There never was a change in you."

"No," Bannon agreed. "I don't change. I'm still the sot I was when you went away, Orin. Still a disgrace to the community and my profession. But you, now—you return to the Wild Buttes with a reputation."

"And little else," Locke shrugged. "No good in that."

"They say that you're the fastest man with a gun in a land of fast men. The coldest-hearted marshal that ever tamed a town. But it's done things to you; you're less than half my age, but you look older than I do."

"And feel it," Locke agreed. "I saw a funeral procession as I came into town. That's unusual."

"What's so unusual about it?"

"Those usually come *after* I hit town." The words were bitter.

"There are plenty of funerals, these days," Bannon commented sadly. "Since gold was found, right under our noses, where the town had walked above it a quarter-century—Highpoint has changed. That funeral was for the sheriff, Burnt Cassell."

"Cassell, you say?" Locke's eyes clouded. "I knew him in Dodge; he was my deputy when I wore the star there."

"He was a good star-toter—till they drygulched him." Bannon's eyes were inquiring, kindly. "You've come home, Orin?"

"Home? *Quien sabe?* The wind blows."

"And it brings odors. The town could use a man of your reputation, now that Cassell's gone. Your reputation and your guns."

Locke shook his head. "I'm through with that sort of thing. Sick of the smell of powder-smoke. All I ask is peace. I'm going out to the Wagon Wheel—at least for a look around. I want to forget that there ever was such a thing as an officer's star."

"If they'll let you. Are you sure you'll find peace on the Wagon Wheel, Orin?"

"I long ago learned that you can never be sure of anything," Locke returned grimly. "Is it that bad?"

"Maybe. *Quien sabe?*"

On that note of question Locke arose. Outside again, he stood, eyes ranging the town. Highpoint was changed; a gold rush did that to a town. And the change was never for the better.

HIGHPOINT was set upon a hill. There were loftier mountains to the north, and more off south. Gaunt canyons sliced from between the hills. The grasslands, more gentle of slope, lay east and west.

Locke had gone away with a driving hell inside him, knowing that he must follow the owlhoot and go to the devil, or do the opposite. The years had written their record, but they had not brought peace.

He found his horse now and left

the town behind, taking a remembered road. The Wagon Wheel lay to the west.

A hunger to see familiar faces had brought him home. Also a hope, thin but never quite dying, that he might be welcome. He rode slowly, hearing the murmur of Queasy Creek, before it should swing south and east to lose itself in a maze of hills.

He had covered half the distance to the Wagon Wheel when his eye caught the light ahead. Here a road crossed an open meadow, but he was still under the shadows of trees which crowded a spring. A similar grove was ahead, and in their soft dusk a cigarette glowed.

Locke stopped. Presently he made out two horses, two riders. Voices came like a whisper. Here was nothing sinister; perhaps a lover's tryst.

He was about to ride ahead when the cigarette made a tiny arc like the flight of a firefly. The gesture of a careless man, there is the dry duffle. Now he was raising his voice, saying good night, riding on up the road, the way Locke was heading.

For a moment, recognizing the voice, Locke sat rigid. There had been no change in seven years. It was still the same assertive voice that he had come to hate—that of his younger brother, Ray. If belief had been in him that time had dulled the ache or coated the festering hate, he knew now that he had deluded himself; it was still there.

Apparently the voice, raised in careless leave-taking, had rasped the nerves of the girl as well. Her horse burst out from under the trees, on to the open road across the meadow, running as from the sudden wild kick of spurred feet. Locke had time to see flying hair, uncovered, pale gold in the caress of the moon. A slender figure who leaned forward in the saddle, face white and set. The next instant brought catastrophe.

This was not so high up as at Highpoint. The road here to the west had been winding, dropping ever since Locke left the town. The meadow was dotted with tiny hummocks of earth, some of them quite fresh—the work of pocket gophers. This was the highest point of elevation which they had reached, anywhere around the Wild Buttes. But here they had been active of late, close beside the road.

Apparently one of their tunnels had undermined the road. Running, the cayuse sent a hoof plunging through, down into the tunnel. Ordinarily it would have caused no damage. Now, running hard, the wrench was disastrous. It threw the pony, sprawling wildly, and the girl was tossed from the saddle to land with a jarring thud.

Snorting, the cayuse got to its feet, unhurt. But the girl lay where she had been flung. She was still motionless when Locke reached her side.

As he stooped, her eyes opened, wide with momentary terror. She stared up, and for an instant he thought she was going to scream. His own voice was quick, reassuring. "Take it easy, ma'am. You'll be all right."

She had good stuff in her. The fright passed, and amazement took its place; she struggled to sit up. Then, becoming aware of the disarray of her dress across shapely ankles, color drove out the whiteness of her cheeks, and she reached to resettle the dress more decorously. Her eyes never left his face.

"What happened?" Her eyes never left his face.

"What happened?" she asked. "It—it was all so quick—"

"It was that," Locke agreed. "Your pony put his foot in a gopher hole, and it throwed him—and you. I hope you're not hurt?"

She shook her head, still watching him. "I'm all right, I think. But you—haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

Locke shook his head. "I wouldn't think so, ma'am."

"But—I have it! You look like Ray Locke! That's it!"

"Might be," Locke conceded, his face expressionless. "Since he's my brother."

Her eyes widened with quick interest. "His brother? Then you're the Marshal? Orin Locke?"

"I'm Orin Locke, yes."

She looked at him a moment longer, frankly curious. "I've never seen a real town-tamer before," she said.

"Some of them look almost human,"

Locke assured her. "Don't judge them all by me."

She colored, as at a rebuke. "But I —I wasn't," she protested. "What I mean is, Mr. Locke, I think you're very good looking—distinguished and all—"

He was no ladies' man. No one had ever accused him of it. But seeing her confusion, he took pity of her. "You've got the advantage of me," he reminded her. "You know who I am."

"Oh yes, of course. I'm from the Three Sevens."

IT WAS Locke's turn to stare. "The Three Sevens?" he repeated. "That's Jeb Landers' spread." He shook his head, remembering Jeb Landers' girl—what was her name, Virginia? She'd been a leggy kid, running to freckles, when he'd seen her last—

"You don't mean to tell me you're Jinny Landers?" he ended, somewhat lamely.

She shook her head, coloring again in quick confusion. "No. Oh no, I didn't mean that. I—I forgot that you didn't know. My father has had the Three Sevens for years now. I'm Reta Cable."

Locke doffed his big hat gravely.

"I'm right pleased to know you, Miss Cable," he agreed, and wondered swiftly concerning her meeting with Ray Locke. A girl as pretty as she was—but it was none of his business, certainly. Now she started to get quickly to her feet, and all but fell, clutching at him with a little moan of anguish.

"Oh—oh, my foot!" she wailed. "It —it hurts!"

Her face had gone bloodless with the pain, so that he knew this was no trick. Holding her for a moment, her face buried in his shoulder, was oddly pleasant. A faint, evasive perfume drifted about her, the moon made gold in her hair as though minting coins. He steadied her, and she sat down again. Locke examined the left foot.

"No bones broken," he pronounced, while she watched him wide-eyed. "But it's swelling. You must have wrenched it. Best thing is to get home and take care of it. Here, I'll help you."

He caught her horse, now grazing contentedly near his own, brought it back, and helped her to her feet. He solved the problem of getting into the saddle by picking her up in his arms and lifting her, lightly as if she had been a child, and depositing her in it.

"One lucky thing, it's not far to your place," he said. "I'll go along and see that you get there all right."

"That's very kind of you—though hardly necessary, Mr. Locke," she said. "I can ride all right."

"But you wouldn't cheat me out of a moonlight ride with a fair lady?" he protested.

She looked at him quickly, struck more by his words than tone. Such phrasing did not suggest the cowboy, nor the two-gun marshal of a tough town. Though, as Dr. Fletcher Bannon could have informed her, such a remark was only to be expected of Orin Locke at unexpected moments.

"Of course, I'll be glad to have you," she agreed. "Ray usually sees me home—but tonight he seemed to have other things on his mind," she added, flushing with remembered annoyance.

"Mebby word had reached him that I was coming," Locke returned. And his thought ran grim. *Hate dies hard!*

2

THE MOONLIGHT was still bright when he approached the Wagon Wheel. A lump arose in Locke's throat for a moment. Up to the time when he had left here, he had virtually never been away from home, had known little of the outer world, even if he had succeeded in making some money, buying and selling cattle. He'd had to learn what life was like, beyond shelter, to make his own way, a hard way.

Seen under the bright moon, there

was little outward change since that day seven years ago, when he had ridden away with his father's dour curse ringing in his ears.

Lights still showed from the windows of two or three rooms in the sprawling house. A man sat huddled in a big rocking chair on the wide porch, the faint creak of it audible in the windless night. Voices came from the bunk house, not far away. It was a warm night, this night of full moon, and would be rather hot and stuffy inside. Consequently, no one was in a hurry to get to bed.

He looked again, with quick intuition, at that figure on the porch. The moonlight reached just to its edge, so that the chair and the man were in shadow. But, from what he had heard he was confident that this would be Ray Locke Sr., his father. A strong man until he had been stricken with heart trouble, which, apparently, had grown progressively worse with the years. Locke had heard rumors that now he was all but helpless. That word had caused him to return.

The rumor had been indirect, slow in filtering across two states. No one had sent to him direct, no invitation to return, or any suggestion that the past might be forgotten or forgiven. No word at all in seven years. But here he was, and there was his father. Report, apparently, had not lied.

He sat his horse a while, unobserved, looking around. Then he swung down from the saddle, but as he started forward, a figure emerged from the shadows near the barn and moved to intercept him—as though this man had been on watch against his coming. Ray Locke. "So you're back."

It was more like a challenge. Hardly a greeting. For a moment the two of them fronted each other, equally tall. There was no welcome in Ray's voice or eyes. None of the old animosity was dead, Locke saw. "I'm back," he agreed, and tried to make his voice sound friendly. "I heard about—Pa."

"He's over there," Ray said uncompromisingly. "In that chair."

"So I see," Locke held his rising temper in leash with an effort. "How was he hurt?"

"He wasn't hurt," Ray retorted. "He's blind."

Locke stood, feeling suddenly deflated. Not for himself, but for the proud, hard man who was his father. Blind! Unable to see, to get around, to take part in things as he had always done. To a man who had always been active, that would be particularly hard. Someway it was worse than if he had been really sick or injured.

"Any chance of—his seeing again?" he asked. "How about an operation?"

"Dr. Emery says there's no chance at all. It's one of those things."

Emery! That too, had an alien sound, here on the Wagon Wheel. Doc Emery had come to Highpoint about a year before his own departure. Probably he was a good enough medico, as doctors went; but Emery had always impressed Lock as obsessed with a sense of his own importance, and that was usually the mark of ignorance of inability.

Fletcher Bannon had always been called in the old days when a medico was needed. Up to the time Ray had been thrown from a horse and brought home, unconscious. One of the cowboys had gotten Emery, and Emery had brought Ray out of that all right; from then on, apparently, it had been Emery.

But Bannon had been the elder Ray Locke's friend, just as he had been Orin's. True it was that Bannon was generally drunk, but even when drunk he was a better doctor than most men—such as Emery—ever managed when sober. But Ray had never liked him. Now that he was running things here, Bannon wouldn't be called.

Locke's lips tightened. He'd like to have Bannon have a look at those eyes—one of these days. Most men had forgotten what not too many had ever known—how really good Bannon could be on occasion. Far too good a doctor to bury himself all these years in a tiny, remote cow town like Highpoint. Save for the liquor, which he couldn't let alone, and for the disillusion which had been upon him through half a life-

time. Bannon had studied in Europe, had walked, in his day, with the great of the earth; few would believe that now.

THE SILENCE was lengthening between them. An uncompromising silence on Ray's part, bluntly hostile.

"That's tough," Locke managed.

"Sure it's tough," Ray agreed. "But you don't want to make it any tougher for him, do you? He's pretty deaf, too. I can manage it that he won't hear about your being back. Be a lot better for him."

No need to ask questions. His father hadn't changed—well, he had hardly expected that he would. Certainly there would be little hope of that, with Ray at home here, running things, having his ear—keeping it poisoned. Rage surged in Locke like the sudden blast of a bolt of lightning, so that he had to fight it down. He'd ridden away, once; endured seven bitter years. Now was no time to go off half-cocked; that wasn't what he'd returned for.

"The best thing that you can do," Ray added. "Is to get on your horse and ride back out. There was no call to come back."

Locke's big fists knotted at his sides, his face whitened. Seeing it, Ray recoiled a step. Locke choked down the words which flooded in his throat. If he said anything, he'd say too much. And for the present he didn't know just what he'd do. He turned, swung back on his horse and rode away.

* * *

Highpoint was still awake. Its saloons were full, and in every outward aspect it was one with the towns where he had worn a marshal's star and carried the law. None of which was in Locke's mind as he left his horse at the livery stable and came out to the street again. He'd have to find a place to stay—and to make up his mind about what to do.

Probably he'd been a fool to come back, as Ray had so bluntly intimated. The years had brought change, but not of the sort which he had hoped for. Yet Ray was, as always, a fool, too arrogant for his own good. He'd curried Locke the wrong way, and that way not helpful in winning a point. Particularly with the remembrance of old wrongs bulking large.

Highpoint's growth was symptomatic of a mushroom mining town. There was no hotel. There would be rooms, of a sort—over saloons, where a man must be inured to plenty of noise if he expected to get any sleep. A far cry from the big, rambling house on the Wagon Wheel, where he had hoped for rest...

Locke turned abruptly, then pulled up short, almost bumping into another pedestrian hurrying the other way. He started mechanically to lift his hat with a murmur of apology as he saw that it was a woman, and then he looked more closely at the widening eyes uplifted to his, the fresh, if rather weary young face beneath them.

"Orin Locke!" she breathed.

There was a dawning smile in her eyes, welcome in her face. For a moment he was at a loss, and then he knew her. "Jinny Landers!" he said. "Is it really you?"

The freckles were a shadowy memory now, the legginess was gone in the perfection of a graceful young colt. Her hair was sleekly, glossily dark. "It's me," she agreed. "Oh, it's good to see you, Orin. I didn't know you were back."

"I just got back," he agreed, and eyed her with quick suspicion which brought a strange hurt with it. Reta Cable had told him that the Landers were no longer on the Three Sevens. And here was Jinny, on the streets of a wild town such as Highpoint had become, at this hour of the night—

She saw the thought on his face, and smiled gently, placing one hand lightly on his arm.

"I live in town, Orin," she said. "I have a little dress-making shop, and I was just delivering a rush order to a lady who had to have it yet this evening." She eyed him, half-quizzically, still with that faint smile in her eyes. "I don't know whether it would be quite circumspect or respectable to ask you into my establishment at this hour to talk! You see, I live in rooms at the rear. Still, we're old friends—"

He knew that she had guessed his

first suspicion, and color ran in his own cheeks. Her friendliness was warming. She was tall, for a woman, though she came only to his shoulder. Her hair reminded him of the sheen of a blackbird's wing, preening in the sun, her eyes were a steady blue beneath. Here was no outstanding beauty, but certainly she was good to look upon. And she might as easily have looked at him with eyes of scorn, as might anyone who had known him in the old days.

"Mebby I could buy a bolt of calico, or something," he suggested. "I'd sure like to talk to you, Jinny. Or I can come around tomorrow."

"You can come now, if you want to," she said, a certain recklessness in words and face. "We never know what tomorrow will bring."

"That's true enough," he agreed, and walked beside her, suddenly at a loss for words. They veered to a side street, quieter than the others, climbed steeply where the sidewalk ended, and stopped at a house which he remembered vaguely. She unlocked the door, busied herself a moment with lighting a lamp, then crossed to draw the shade.

THIS WAS her work room, he knew at once, with a table and chairs and sewing machine, and bolts of cloth on shelves at one side. For a moment she looked at him, and again there was a faint smile about the corners of her mouth.

"I'm going to make coffee," she said. "And I don't think it's any worse for you to sit in the kitchen and drink it, than in here, do you?"

This was unconventional, but it was warm and friendly, and he sensed that she had known his deep need for friendliness. He followed her to the little kitchen, rich with fragrant odors of baking, and sat in a rocking chair and watched with pleasure as she stirred the dying fire in the range.

The furniture was old. The chair in which he sat had been broken, the back replaced with carpet tacked in place, which had curved comfortably to fit the back. Here was hominess, and the odor of the coffee was pleasant.

Nor was she stopping with that. She was setting out half a cake, slicing it, moving with swift dexterity.

"I'm awfully glad you came, Orin," she said. "I like to make a cake, once in a while—it reminds me of the old days. But even if I make a pig of myself, it's in danger of getting stale. Fortunately, this one is not too old, so I hope you'll eat two or three pieces and help me out."

As she talked, pouring the coffee, Locke sensed something else. The loneliness, the hunger for companionship, which was in her.

"It's awfully good cake," he said. "And good of you. But what happened—about the ranch?"

She looked at him quickly, seating herself opposite him. "Dad died, two years ago. After things were settled up—well, there wasn't much left. I had expected that everything was in fine shape—but it didn't turn out that way."

She smiled then, and changed the subject adroitly. "And you've grown famous since you went away. Everybody knows who Orin Locke is."

"Never mind me," he said. "Tell me about yourself."

But there was little to tell, she insisted. She was a dressmaker, and that was all there was to it. Not too prosperous, Locke judged. With the exception of Bannon, she was probably the only old friend he had around here. Fate hadn't treated them too well, either.

He left, presently, warmed by her welcome, with the invitation to come again. She had made no complaint. If he had been thinking that his own lot was tough, her's was a great deal worse. There were so few things that a woman could do, but Jinny was doing what came to hand. He knew that he would call there again.

Locke paused, debating where he should seek a room. As he hesitated, a stranger accosted him. "Got a match, feller?"

"Yeah." Locke fumbled in a pocket and produced the match. The other man accepted it wordlessly, flicked it alight with his thumb nail, and raised it toward the cigarette already pendulous between his lips. The light revealed a harsh, bull-dog face, a head that seemed to hunch down between massive shoulders. But there

was scant time for Locke to make this appraisal.

The flare of the match was close to his own face as well, revealing, and he sensed suddenly, as the match flickered out without touching the tip of the cigarette, that that had been the whole purpose of it—to get a look at him. And now, satisfied with what it had shown, the man was bringing his other hand up in swift and deadly gesture, the muzzle of a gun centering at point-blank range on Locke's chest.

3

STARTLED, Locke was too old a campaigner to be caught completely off-guard. The look in the other man's eyes telegraphed his intention. It was only a split second of warning.

The twin six-shooters in his own holsters were too far away. Already the muzzle of the other gun was centering on Locke's chest. But the killer had been forced to stand close to have the match throw its light into Locke's face. Locke's knee came up in a plunging forward jerk, burying itself in the gunman's groin.

Gasping with agony, the other man gave back, the gun wavering. An instant later Locke twisted it away. Rage boiled in him at the attempted murder. While the other man still writhed, Locke clipped him alongside the head with the barrel of the forty-five—a damaging blow which drove his opponent to his knees, taking the fight out of him. Locke poised above him, gun ready for a second blow.

"Who sent you to kill me?" he demanded. "Talk fast!"

The gunman hesitated, cringing, throwing up a hand before his face. Weaponless, the tables so neatly turned, courage had all oozed out of him. "I'll talk," he whined. "You're Locke, ain't you? Well, who'd send me after you—but someone from the Wagon Wheel?"

Here was confirmation of what Locke had feared. Who else would know that he was back in this country, but Ray Locke? Ray had been afraid, standing to lose everything which he had built up on a tissue of treachery. It was all horrible, but he did not doubt that the man was telling the truth.

Abruptly he turned away, walking fast. He came to the glare of brightly-lit windows. Here a sign reared obtrusively above the sidewalk. *Beer Bottle Saloon.* An over-sized beer bottle was suspended in a wire loop above the door, filled with what looked like liquor. But liquor would bring no surcease for what ailed him.

Today he had returned to the Wild Buttes, drawn in part by soul hunger, in part by a feeling of duty. Time, he had told himself, was the great healer. Hope had been in him, across the miles.

But hope was gone now, killed in word and action since the moon had risen. Now the moon had set, and it was like a symbol. A gleam now gone, leaving only darkness. Wearily, Locke turned toward the livery stable. It was no use. He'd sleep in the hay, and in the morning he'd ride out of Highpoint. For the last time.

* * *

Locke ate in a cheap and greasy restaurant, new since his day, and like all the new Highpoint. Like the restaurants in so many other towns which he had known. It was somehow amazing, the number of places you could see, all alike, across a span of seven years. He'd hoped that he was all through with that sort of life.

His face set in the old lines, unsmiling, a little harsher if that was possible. A minor regret was beside the greater today, that he would not see Jinny Landers again. He had a feeling that Jinny was like himself, a lost soul adrift with no port in sight. They had been friends in school days, but that was ages ago. The thought of her held regret. But it would be better to go.

Someone stopped beside his stool. A slight, wispy man with straw-colored hair and watery eyes to match. He even sucked on a straw, squinting up, to complete the picture.

"You Orin Locke?" he asked, and his voice was surprisingly deep and full.

Locke studied him, caution flaring from remembrance of the night and old habit alike. But no one else in the restaurant seemed in any way interested, and he had a certainty that the wispy man was no more than a messenger—though why that he could not conceive.

"Locke's my name," he agreed. "Why?"

"There's a couple fellers want to talk to you. Business.

Locke hesitated, minded to refuse. Business! He knew what that meant. It was always the same when he came to a town, for his reputation preceded him. Still, what did it matter? What else was there for him, wherever he might go? The old zest was gone, and he knew that it would never be recaptured. Something in him, sick a long time, had died during the night. He might as well listen to what they had to say.

He shrugged, tossed a silver dollar on to the counter and stood up, looming suddenly tall in the half-gloom of the restaurant. "Lead the way," he invited. "Time is what I've got plenty of."

* * *

"ORIN LOCKE? For Sheriff! Are you crazy?"

It was a big room, and, for Highpoint, a remarkable one, this office in the rear of the *Wild Buttes Saloon*. It contained luxury undreamed of by most citizens of the town, or patrons of the outer room. Here was fine furniture, upholstered in leather. An Oriental rug covered the floor; an oil painting of obviously good taste and considerable value hung on the wall. The other fittings showed the same careful selection, with expense no consideration. There was not another room in Highpoint like it.

Nor were there other men in the Wild Buttes to match these two who now conferred together. Both were big men, physically, but in different ways. Grant Cable, who lounged comfortably in a deep chair and smoked a long black cigar, was the perfect representation of what the successful rancher and cattleman should be.

He was in his early fifties, a tall man now putting on comfortable but scarcely excess poundage. His dark brown hair was fringed with gray, and his face was big to match the nose, strong to measure up to the wide, firm-set mouth. Calmness dwelt in his eyes, in his every deliberate gesture. A slightly mocking smile was in the back of his eyes now as he listened to his companion's incredulous exclamation.

No one but King Steele would have thought of talking to Cable in such a manner. But this was Steele's office, just as the *Wild Buttes* was his saloon. And anyone in all the Wild Buttes could have said offhand that these two men, between them, held most of the power and wealth of town and country—that they controlled Highpoint and the Wild Buttes. Destiny was in their hands

Steele's were quick and nervous, yellow-stained from continual rolling of cigarettes. Scarcely had one been consumed than he was twisting at another. He was considerably younger than Cable, tall, wide-built a man who walked with imperious stride as he jumped to his feet to pace back and forth, looking at the world from greenish eyes beneath hair almost completely colorless. But there was nothing colorless about the man. This room showed that he had wealth. Those who knew him understood the ruthlessness with which he had obtained it.

Cable chuckled now, as he flicked off the ash of his cigar.

"Crazy?" he repeated. "I don't think so, King. You're not forgetting that Cassell is buried?"

"Nor why," Steele snapped. "He was too headstrong to handle. From all reports, this Orin Locke is even more so. I happen to know that Cassell was a disciple of his—was once his deputy, and proud to pattern after him. Locke has a reputation over the whole west—to match that of Wild Bill Hicock, or Pat Garrett, or any other of that crowd. That's just the sort of sheriff we don't want."

"I'm new since Locke left this part of the country," Cable said comfortably. "But compared to you, King, I'm an old-timer around here. Maybe I know a few things concerning local

history that haven't come to your ears. You'll have to admit that, so far as the public is concerned, Orin Locke would be the perfect man for the job."

"For the public, yes." Steele sat down jerkily, began to roll a fresh quirly, spilling some of the brown grains as he did so, on to the elaborate rug. He gave it no attention. "But maybe *you* don't know one part of recent history, Grant. It happened last night. I sent Toomey Harris to kill this Locke, last night!"

THE TIP of the cigar twitched slightly. Cable's eyes narrowed.

"And he only hit town yesterday afternoon. Wasn't that rather precipitate?"

"Maybe." The words were arrogant. "But I run the town, Grant, just as you run the country—that's our agreement. And it struck me that a man like him, coming here just after Cassell was buried, would be the popular choice for sheriff—and so could be a damned nuisance. I've heard a certain amount of local history. So I got hold of Harris and took steps."

He scratched a match and puffed jerkily, his face betraying nothing of the devious reasons behind this action.

"And what happened?" Cable asked expectantly.

Steele hunched his shoulders. "From the way I gather it, Toomey asked Locke for a match, scratched it in his face to take a look and see that he had the right man, and brought up his gun in his other hand at the same time. Apparently reports haven't been wrong about this star toter. He's hell on wheels, if Toomey Harris's appearance is anything to go by. After being trapped that way, Locke took his gun away from him and worked him over. And I use the word advisedly."

"That's interesting." Cable smoked, a smile at the corners of his mouth. "And you picked a hand from the Wagon Wheel for the job, it seems."

"I figured Toomey was the man for such a chore."

"You would. From your account I'm more than ever convinced that Locke is our man for sheriff. In fact, I sent for him, and if I'm not mistaken, he's here now. "Come in," he called, as there was a peculiar knock on the door.

The wispy man opened the door, but did not enter. He stood back, and Locke, after a quick appraisal of the two men in the room, went on in. Cable came to his feet, and Steele was quick to follow.

"Mr. Locke?" Cable asked, and extended his hand. "I'm Grant Cable, of the Three Sevens. This is King Steele, who owns this saloon and about half the town."

Locke accepted their handshakes, studying both men. Cable waved him to a chair, observing that he had not bothered with any of the polite nothings. In fact, so far Locke had said not a word.

"We've heard of you, of course," Cable went on. "That's natural. And perhaps you know that we buried our sheriff yesterday; it seemed providential that you should arrive as you did."

"You gentlemen, I take it, are a committee to pick a sheriff to fill the vacancy till the next election?" Locke suggested.

"Exactly," Cable agreed. "Whoever we recommend will receive the appointment."

"I don't think I'd be interested in the job," Locke said bluntly. "There'd be strings attached."

"In that, you're quite correct," Cable agreed with equal bluntness. "There will be strings attached; that's why we're picking you."

Steele looked at his companion in quick surprise. Locke eyed him with more interest. "At least, you're frank about it."

"I can afford to be," Cable nodded. "You've probably guessed already that King here, and I, control this country. What we want, we get. But the first rule in running a country is to put on a good show for the populace. The Caesars learned that a long while ago."

"And you think I'd make a good front?"

"We know you would. You've ex-

actly the right reputation, and plenty of ability."

Steele was watching, smoking furiously but saying nothing. Locke looked from one to the other. "From all I've heard," he said. "There's a lot of lawlessness in this country. It could be stopped by the men who are boss—if they wanted it stopped. And I've heard, since coming to town, that Sheriff Cassell was killed because he was trying to clean things up."

"Score yourself a hundred on that answer, Mr. Locke," Cable agreed smoothly.

Locke's brows twitched. "And if I were marshal—or sheriff, I'd run a job the same as I've always run it. To clean the town up. Which, I take it, is what you want. So, you see, you've got the wrong man."

"Score fifty on that," Cable murmured. "You're partly right. We don't want the town cleaned up; but we have got the right man."

"You figure you can bribe me?"

"Naturally. Every man has his price." Cable lifted a deprecating hand. "Don't get me wrong. Some won't take money; you're that sort. But you'll be perfect for the job, running it the way we want it run. And we can match your price."

LOCKE relaxed, stretching long legs before him. "This is at least interesting," he observed.

"I hoped you'd find it so. You see, Locke. I know some things which most people merely think they know about. The public had pretty well forgotten, or chosen to forget, why you left the Wagon Wheel and the Wild Buttes. You've made such a reputation as a two-gun marshal, a town-tamer, that you've shed a good bit of reflected glory on your old community. So they've chosen to forget that you left here with your father's curse ringing in your ears, branded a thief—in the sum of ten thousand dollars."

Locke tensed, his face more rigid. "What about it?" he asked tonelessly.

"Just this. As I say, I happen to know the truth about that—which few people even suspect. The truth being that you shouldered the blame for a theft committed by your brother Ray, who had to pay a gambling debt and was desperate. You took that blame because your father had a bad heart and any shock was likely to kill him. Any shock, that is, in connection with Ray, who was the apple of his eye, and who, in his opinion, could do no wrong. What you did, however, came as no surprise to the old man; Ray had pulled the wool over his eyes until he believed anything bad about you."

Steele had ceased to puff, Locke slowly straightened, drawing his legs up again. He had supposed that this secret was deep buried; it was amazing to hear it from the lips of such a man as Grant Cable.

"You're a strange man, Locke," Cable went on, and for a moment admiration crept into his tones. "I think I've delved until I found out the truth. You're a man. You loved your father, despite the shabby way he's treated you, the opinion he has held of you. You not only shouldered that blame, to save, as you believed, his life, but you returned the money—taking every cent you'd been able to make and save to do it. And giving up what was developing into a profitable business in buying and selling cattle. You paid back what you'd never stolen. You left Ray in control, not only of your father, but of the Wagon Wheel, half of which should rightfully belong to you. You left under that stigma, and became an exile. You're a fool, but you're a man."

Still Locke made no comment. He was somewhat dazed that this should be known, but it was the truth. Steele was rolling a fresh cigarette with hands which trembled. Cable's cigar had gone out. He lit it again, leaned with instinctive courtesy to hold the match for Steele, and puffed contemplatively.

"You returned, Locke, because you had heard that your father was in a bad way. Finding him still of the same opinion, and in some respects in worse shape than before, you prepared to let sleeping dogs lie and ride out again. Very noble. But you

did it because you still love the old man."

"And what's that to you— one way or the other?" Locke demanded.

"Just this: it shows your weak point, and Steele and I are the sort of crass materialists who play on weakness. Your brother Ray has continued, during the years, to make a fool of himself. He still holds your father's trust and affection, but your father knows now that Ray isn't the plaster saint he once thought him. In fact, Ray got into a scrape here, a while back—Steele knows about that, and so do I—and to help him get out, your father killed a man."

Steele's face had lost its color. Cable viewed both men blandly through the haze of smoke.

"As a killing, it was quite justified, and all that sort of thing. Still, it was a killing."

The room was silent for a space. Even Steele was sitting quietly, gripped by this strange recital.

"I had the power to smooth things over—which I did," Cable went on. "But I have signed papers, and witnesses as to what happened. If I saw fit, by using them, I could watch your father kick in a gallows. All quite legally, but beyond the shadow of a doubt. I haven't done it. So long as you serve as sheriff, and serve as we want you to, he is safe; but only that long!"

4

IT WAS checkmate, there was no least doubt of that. Locke mulled it over, grayly. Where Grant Gable had gotten his information, he had no way of guessing, but so far as it concerned himself, it was accurate enough. Probably he had been a fool. In retrospect, he had been able to see his mistakes.

But he had played it that way, and he couldn't quit now—not when his father was sick and blind and deaf. All that he had left was his affection, however misplaced, for the son of his second wife. There had been a wild strain in all the Leverings, all save Orin's stepmother; she, so far as he had ever observed, had missed the taint. Certainly she had been good to him, for the few brief years that she had lived. Dying so soon, his father had more than ever idolized her memory, lavished his love on the son she left behind.

The taint of the Leverings had cropped up again in Ray, the old wildness. Last night had given added proof of that. But his father loved Ray, the more passionately, perhaps, because he had discovered the weakness in him. And because he had long since been led to believe that there was nothing of honesty or decency in his older son.

This older that Cable said was probably true, too—or at least framed to have the same effect.

But having followed a course, however mistaken, and undeniably bitter, for all these years, Locke knew that he couldn't change at this time; not when the price would be so much worse than before.

And, after all, what did it matter? What was honor, in the abstract, but one of the intangibles? He had cherished it in his heart. But no one believed that he had it or ever had possessed it—no one, with the ironic exception of this man who was forcing him to barter it away now for his fathers honor and life.

His father, the one being on earth whom he had loved and wished to protect, did not think that he possessed it. The public had considered him a thief, bringing disgrace to his family name, grief to his father. He had the name of a bad dog. What did the rest matter?

"It's a funny thing," he said, looking at Cable directly. "By your own admission, you're a scoundrel; yet I have a feeling that if I take you up, your word will be good."

"Every man has his private point of honor," Cable replied quietly; "I'm glad you can appreciate it, Locke. So long as you work with us, we'll back

you to the limit. And you'll get your share. You've risked your life all these years for nothing. Isn't it about time that you got something back? The other has never paid off."

That was all true. Not that it sweetened the pill he had to take. Locke shrugged. "I'm not doing it because of the money, or because I like your game for a minute," he said. "I'm doing it only because I have to. I take it that you two head up all the lawlessness in this country. I hate that sort of thing. And ordinarily, when I wear a star, I work to clean up a town. But this time—well, like I say, I'll wear your star. Not because I want to, but because I have to."

"That's showing good sense, Locke; we understand each other." At Cable's nod, Steele opened a drawer of his desk and tossed a shiny object across. Cable caught it, handed it to Locke. A sheriff's star.

"The committee will confirm our choice," he said; "It's just a formality. You're sheriff, and there's a certain amount of cleaning up to be done. The town has gotten rather out of hand of late. Likewise, elements from outside are trying to horn in—and will need to be cleaned out. And here's the key to your office."

* * *

Cable waited until Locke had gone, walking out like a man not fully awake. Then he looked across at Steele. "Well?"

Steele grinned. "I'll have to hand it to you," he confessed. "That's a new way of handling a man." He drummed thoughtfully on the desk with long, powerful fingers, the smile changing to a frown.

"Maybe you can figure out this other, too," he went on. "I suppose you've heard the talk that's going around? About forming an organization of vigilantes to clean up the town?"

"I've heard it," Cable agreed. "It sounds like a good idea to me, one that should be encouraged."

"Are you crazy?" Steele demanded, in stark amazement. "You know what will be directed against—ourselves."

"That's the second time you've asked me if I was crazy," Cable reminded in high good-humor. "Of course the vigilantes will be directed against us—only they don't know it. Yes, I think the time is ripe for such an organization. Let's work to see that it gets formed, by all means. We will be among the founders, the charter-members, as you might say. Could you ask a sweeter set-up?"

SLOWLY Steele's frown vanished, to be replaced by the grin. "Old-Timer," he said. "My apologies; you're crazy like a fox. We go along with all the programs for civic improvement, for cleaning up the lawless element. Our membership is a guarantee of our own integrity. But what about our new sheriff? Doesn't this rather reflect upon him? Show sort of a lack of faith?"

Cable waved his cigar airily. "Not at all. In fact, quite the contrary. We have a new sheriff of the highest ability, of unimpeachable integrity. But he has a tough job—more than any one man and a small group of deputies can be expected to handle. Why shouldn't the honest, substantial citizens, who see eye to eye with the law, work on an organized basis to assist that law?"

"You should have been a preacher, or a politician," Steele commended. "But won't the vigilantes be rather a hindrance? There's that gold that has to be shipped out of here. It can't be delayed much longer. But if there's a vigilance committee, they'll insist on guarding their gold when it goes out."

"Of course they will, and what more could we ask? You'll have a share in that shipment. So will I. We will be as eager as any one else to have it protected, so that a robbery isn't staged somewhere along the road. But that part will be simple. We'll tell the boys that there will be a dummy shipment, as well as the real one. Only, they will guard the dummy!"

"That's on a par with the rest of it," Steele approved. "And you're right; we can work much more effectively for being in with the vi-

gilantes. Let's see. There ought to be fifty thousand or so in the next shipment, eh?"

"At least that much ought to be risked. Though some of them will hang on as long as they can, to avoid any risk of losing it." Cable laughed drily.

"I'll start the word moving in the proper quarters, today," Steele agreed thoughtfully. "But we may be in for trouble later on, when we get ready to take over the claims around here. If there's a strong organization to back them, they'll be ready to fight."

"And we'll fight right alongside of them," Cable assured him. "We'll even band together to make sure on a legal basis that there can be no claim stealing. Everybody in together on an organization to protect the rights of all. Something that's so big nobody can touch it or buck it."

"And one fine morning they'll wake up to find that the corporation has control, and they're out in the cold," Steele smiled. "That's really perfect, Grant. It lifts the deal outside the scope of highway holdups and makes it high finance. They won't even know what's happened to them."

"I think the plan has merit," Cable agreed. "And now I've got to be getting along; there's plenty to do."

"You're right," Steele nodded, pocketing his tobacco-sack.

* * *

Apparently someone had gone through the sheriff's office before turning it over to him, removing everything which might prove incriminating. What was left was impersonal, cold. *Just the way I feel inside,* Locke thought bitterly.

He'd followed a long trail, with a noose at the end of it; now he was caught. Had the noose been for himself, it would not have been so bad. But it was for his father, old and broken now. He experienced a wonder that two such men, ambitious for power, should be working together. Probably they wouldn't be—long, but that was of no help now; clapping on his hat, he went out into the sunshine.

The atmosphere of the town was cramped and stifling. As always, he headed for open country, swinging off from the road, across unfenced lands, riding aimlessly. But it brought no comfort; this was his land, where he had played as a boy, and he was betraying it. He dismounted beneath a clump of evergreens, and it was there that Reta Cable found him, riding suddenly into sight.

She pulled up, looking down at him, lips parted, eyes smiling. Locke stood up, removing his hat.

"I saw you—and of course I wanted to say hello—and to thank you again, after you were so helpful, last night," Reta said in sudden breathlessness.

"From your looks, you must be in good shape this morning," Locke returned gravely. "I hope your ankle doesn't trouble you too much?"

"It bothers me a little for walking, but it's fine for riding," she assured him. "And I think I could get down and sit a while—if you'd help me. And if I wouldn't disturb you."

He hid a smile at her naivete, but he moved quickly to assist her, holding her for a moment in his arms. She was light, as he had found before, a pleasant burden. Then she was seated beside him, arranging her dress decorously across shapely limbs, indicating her injured ankle.

"See, it's scarcely swollen at all." Her eyes widened suddenly. "Oh! You're wearing a star today! That means you're our new sheriff!"

"Your father persuaded me to accept the appointment," Locke agreed.

"Oh, I'll kiss him for that! It's wonderful! You're just what this country needs so badly!"

Having no adequate reply, Locke made none. No whit disconcerted, Reta went on, dreamily now.

"Somehow, it seems as if I'd known you for a long time—as if we were old friends. Maybe that's because I've known so much about you, and because I know your father and brother. I think your father's wonderful."

Locke looked at her with sudden interest. "Do you see him often?"

"Oh, yes. He seems to enjoy talking to me—he gets pretty lonesome, these days, now that he can't see, and isn't able to move around or do any-

thing. It's hard on him—he's really quite well and strong, if it wasn't for his blindness. He'd still be able to ride as well as ever."

"His heart doesn't bother him too much, then?"

"I don't know; he never says anything about it. Did it bother him?"

"It used to," Locke said briefly. For a moment she eyed him queerly, seeming to understand that there had been no correspondence between them during these years. Abruptly, tactfully, she changed the subject.

"I'm glad that Dad picked you for sheriff," she said. "It shows his good judgment. He's really rather good at picking men, I think. And—and I'm sure that it isn't what King Steele would have wanted. A man like you for sheriff."

"What makes you think that?" Locke asked.

"Oh—a lot of things. The sort of man that Steele is, for instance." She was absently tracing a pattern in the short grass with one finger. "I guess I'm not being very clear, but what I mean is, if Dad likes this, I'm sure Steele won't. And I'm glad."

"Why should you be glad? Don't you like Steele?"

Her eyes met his quickly, blazing with unexpected fire.

"I hate him!" she said fiercely. "You see—well, he hasn't been in this country very long—only about two years. We've been here six years. Steele came here without much of anything. Now he's one of the two biggest men in the Wild Buttes. He—he's ruthless."

"He has the appearance of a gentleman," Locke suggested.

"That's just a pose. He knows how to put on an act—and to spend money, other people's money. But I tell you he's ruthless. How else could he get control of half the country in a couple of years if he wasn't without scruple? What has worried me so much was that Dad seemed to like him—to be friends with him. I thought once that they would be sure to clash—you know, when the irresistable force meets the immovable object, or something like that. But they haven't. But this way, now—if Dad backs you—then I don't think he and Steele will be friends much longer."

LOCKE could understand more than she guessed. It was apparent to him that she idolized her father, which seemed to indicate that there were strong qualities of good in the man, as well as evil. Apparently she had no suspicion that he was leagued with Steele, that he was the same sort of man that she believed Steele to be.

But it was clear to him now why the two of them worked together. Both were strong men, and ruthless, both greedy for power. Apparently they had come close to a clash, and had been canny enough to recognize the dangers inherent in such a situation. Neither had felt strong enough at the time to risk a battle with the other, in which one must dominate and the other be utterly crushed.

So they had united their forces, and in union there had been strength. But perhaps it was an uneasy union, as Reta was unconsciously suggesting.

"You know Steele rather well, then?" he asked.

"Too well!" she flashed, and color surged in her cheeks. "He's called at the Three Sevens often—supposedly to talk to Dad, but mostly to see me, I know. I didn't give him much encouragement; I hate him!"

Her ready acceptance of himself, Locke realized, could be traced to her friendship with his brother. He guessed that she was probably in love with Ray. Maybe there was some good in Ray, if she liked him. Years before, as boys together, there had been real affection between them. Somewhere it had been lost.

"That's not a nice way to welcome you home, is it, Sheriff?" Reta asked suddenly. "And I do want you to feel that you are welcome! Now, if you'll help me back on my horse, I won't disturb you any longer."

Locke lifted her into the saddle, and she smiled down at him.

"You do that very well," she said demurely. "If you're around, I expect that my ankle will be slow in healing! But I do thank you—and I

meant what I said, about being friends. I hope that you'll feel free to come to the Three Sevens, any time. You'll be welcome."

She hesitated, made as if to say more, changed her mind, and galloped quickly away. Neither of them knew that King Steele had been following them, had been near enough to hear Reta's outburst.

5

HEADING back for town, Locke encountered Fletcher Bannon, and the worn black bag tied behind the saddle told that Bannon had been on one of his infrequent professional calls. Bannon's eyes glinted at sight of the sheriff's star. "So!" he said. "They have picked you for the sucker, then!"

"I'm afraid your phrasing is apt," Locke acknowledged.

"Having a pair of pitcher-like ears, much filters into them," Bannon sighed; "but it might be that they've saddled the wrong nag, eh?"

Locke shrugged. How much Bannon might suspect, he didn't know. But he couldn't say anything, even to his old friend.

"You've been on your professional rounds?" he asked.

"Professional rounds, he says! Bless you, Orin, for the sound of those words! They bespeak a long departed glory. But, once in a while, when our good contemporary Emery is otherwise occupied, or some poor devil can't pay his fee, they do remember Fletcher Bannon. And, strange as it seems, most of them get well!"

"Naturally," Locke agreed. "Drunk, you're a better doctor than many a sober man. A lot of people would be surprised to learn that you had studied in France and Germany, that you once walked with the great, and had big ideas!"

Bannon's eyes kindled to the reflected flash of old fires. "Ideas!" he echoed. "So I did, Orin, so I did. Ideas which were the ruin of me! When I tried hypnotism as an adjunct to medicine, and made a cure, was I applauded? Was I acclaimed a hero, a trail-blazer? Was I even given a chance to explain? No. To them it was a black art, smacking of the devil! Why do I weep in my beer, like the old, broken, defeated fool that I am?"

"Or take surgery. Men shudder away from it. But with the knife, properly used—and proper cleanliness—much can be done. I dreamed dreams—and I blubber in my beer! No, no, Orin, professional rounds do not apply to me."

"But with a friend like you returning, I should be gay as the larks—which I am. Listen! From the sound, it's a job for you, as our new custodian of the law!"

Locke heard it too. Highpoint was close ahead, and two quick shots sounded, followed after a short interval by three more. Spaced as they were, they had a sound of trouble. Locke put his horse to a run.

* * *

Those guns shots had not spoken falsely. Here was trouble. Rounding on the street, Locke slowed, a sudden coldness in him as though the temperature had dropped instead of risen here where the building and sidewalks reflected back the heat.

It needed only a look around to see what had happened. Two men were there in the street, both with bandanas, one blue, one red, draped across their faces, with slitted eye holes cut in them. The door of the Highpoint Bank stood open, and a man lay sprawled, half in, half out of the doorway, not moving. No one was near him.

This was robbery, a bold daylight hold-up of the bank. That in itself was enough to tell Locke that these men were his meat, a pair of bold independent raiders and no part of the outlaw organization which Cable and Steele controlled. They would not rob their own bank, nor do things quite so crudely.

But this robbery, if crude, was effective. The street was full of men, aroused and disgruntled citizens who resented what was taking place and

wanted to put a stop to it. Despite their overwhelming numbers, they were keeping well back and away from the two, cowed by their brashness.

The outlaws still had a short way to go to reach their horses, and one of them was weighted down with a bulging gunny sack full of loot. Nonetheless, they were masters of the situation. Luck and ruthlessness had favored them, once they had stepped outside the bank. They had grabbed a hostage who happened to be passing by, were using her now for a shield so that no one else dared try to shoot or stop them.

Jinny Landers was the hostage.

One robber held her in his arms, and carried her along as easily as if she had been a child. Apparently she had tried to struggle, but he had put a stop to that with the same brutal efficiency which had caused the populace to abandon any attempt at shooting and to shrink back, appalled. The cold muzzle of the outlaw's forty-five was close against Jinny, an unmistakable threat.

As they walked, she served for a fairly adequate shield in front of the pair, and no one was behind them. The added threat was repeated now by the man who held her.

"Any of you try anything, and she gets plugged!" he warned. "We're going out of here!"

A few more steps would bring them to their horses. Yet to try and stop them was to insure Jinny's swift and certain death.

THE PAIR were moving deliberately, taking their time, grimly sure of themselves. Locke's eyes swept the street. Then, one gun was out of the holster and glinting in the sunlight, its thunder a sharp savage break in the strain.

They were passing in front of the *Beer Bottle Saloon,* directly below the gallon-sized bottle fastened by a wire loop above the doorway. Accustomed to seeing this as part of the sign, it now held no special significance for the outlaws.

But it was new to Locke, full of possibilities. His bullet shattered the huge bottle, sending a rain of broken glass and liquid spilling upon them. As he had guessed, the bottle was not filled with real beer, though that would have done well enough for his purpose. His nose told him what it was: coal oil.

The rancid kerosene made a shower in their faces, spilling over them. Locke was moving in fast, on foot now, taking advantage of his opportunity. One outlaw was momentarily blinded and helpless. The other tried desperately to shoot back, and Locke fired a second time, driving a bullet through his leg and sending him in a sprawling heap, the loot sack spilling as he fell.

It had all happened so fast that the onlookers were dazed and not quite certain what was transpiring before their eyes.

Locke was in control now. His glance fell anxiously on the spot where Jinny had been spilled as unceremoniously as the kerosene. "You hurt?" he asked.

Her dress reeked with the oil. The blood had been driven from her face when they had seized her, and it was just now starting to flow back normally. Still, she contrived to smile.

"I'm fine," she replied, and showed her high mettle. "But I never guessed that beer could taste so awful!"

She turned then, away from the clumsy interest of the crowd now beginning to press in close, and picked her way down the street toward her own home. There were plenty to help now with the prisoners, but Locke made sure that he had their weapons, and from the corner of his eye he saw that Jinny was by herself, forgotten in the excitement of the capture. Someone voiced a suggestion.

"What they need is to be strung up!"

"Yeah, and why waste time?" another bystander seconded. "The sooner the better!"

Locke eyed them coldly. His voice, brittle and hard, cut through the rising clamor. "Speaking as a man, I'm in full agreement with you that it's what they deserve," he said. "But my name's Orin Locke, and I'm speaking as sheriff. There'll be no lynching; don't forget they're my prisoners!"

There was magic in that name—and he had put it there. A few of them

had known of his appointment, but most of them had not. But when he told them, there were none who failed to understand.

A ragged cheer went up. There was no further talk of lynching. Locke moved across to the bank, and what he had already suspected was confirmed. The man who sprawled in the doorway was dead.

The pair would hang for it, in due course and by process of law rather than lynch-mob. Yet they had come within a shade of success. Only the bottle above the doorway had afforded a solution and a way of stopping them. The crowd was loud in praise of what he had done, but Locke brushed it impatiently aside. That had been luck. In any case, dealing with outlaws was an old routine. His thoughts were with Jinny.

Once the prisoners were in jail and he had sent for Fletcher Bannon to treat the wounded man, Locke moved up the steep side-street to the dressmaking establishment. Seen under the light of day, the building was older, shabbier. And not in a good business location. Only one thing could commend it—low rental. Again he wondered what had happened to bring Jinny, heiress to the Three Sevens, to such as this. From what he knew about Grant Cable, who now claimed the ranch as his own, it was not hard to guess that there had been crooked work.

HE HESITATED for a moment before the outer door, then opened it. As he closed it behind him, Jinny's voice came from somewhere at the back. "I'll be with you in just a minute. Please make yourself at home."

"I'll do that," Lock agreed. "Take your time, Jinny."

"Oh! It's you, Orin." There was relief, a swift-flowing warmth in her tones like quicksilver. She appeared in the doorway, twisting at a long rope of her hair, a couple of hair-pins in her mouth. Removing them, she rolled the braid expertly in place and fastened it, and the act was warm and pleasant in his eyes.

"I've been scrubbing," she volunteered. "But I still reek of coal-oil. Not but what I was thankful for that particular kind of a bath! I didn't see what you or anybody could do—and I was terrified!"

He saw that she had a small cut on her forehead, from a bit of the broken glass. She had kept vigorously busy at cleaning up since returning, but he could sense the nervous reaction, her need to talk.

"I want a cup of coffee, and so will you," she said. "There's still some of that cake left!"

Locke followed her out to the kitchen. Not content with the cake, she was scrambling eggs, putting out bread and butter. He raised no objection, and they ate almost in silence but in growing companionship. Finally Locke pushed back his chair with a sigh.

"That's the last of the cake," he said. "You won't need to worry about it any longer."

"Somehow, since you've returned, I've a feeling as if I didn't need to worry about anything," Jinny replied seriously. "We've got real law here at last—and I feel as if there was security in the world again. I haven't felt that way for a long time."

"This makes me feel like homecoming, too," Locke assured her. Inwardly he was far from calm. He had made a good beginning as sheriff, a spectacular one. People would believe all that they had heard about him as an officer, would have the same expectations as Jinny.

And he was in no position to deliver the goods. That was what rankled. It was ironic even that he should stop that pair from robbing the bank. He was being hired to protect greater thieves from harm when they planned to do essentially the same. To assure that they did their looting under the cloak of the law.

A fly buzzed near the ceiling, and a sleepy cat, roused from its nap, came from behind the stove, yawning. It blinked calculatingly, then rubbed purringly against Locke's leg. He stroked it absently.

"How did your father lose the Three Sevens, Jinny?" he asked. "You didn't give me any details."

"There was a mortgage, it seems," she explained. "I hadn't known about

it. Dad never mentioned it, and I was stunned when I found out. But —" she spread her hands in a helpless gesture. "There was nothing that could be done. They told me at the bank that they wouldn't foreclose if I could find a purchaser; Mr. Cable took over the mortgage and paid me a thousand dollars besides."

"How much was the mortgage for?"

"A hundred thousand dollars."

"A hundred thousand dollars," Locke repeated, unbelievingly. If it had been that much, Cable had been generous. But none of this made sense. There had been no debts against the Three Sevens when he had lived in the Wild Buttes. He knew that from overhearing a remark made by Jinny's father not long before he had left the country.

Moreover, Landers had not been a gambling man. That made it all the more strange—and improbable. A quarter of that sum, even half—but twenty five or fifty thousand dollars might have been paid off by sacrificing the herds. This other had taken everything in a clean sweep.

The implications was clear. It had been worked through the bank, and Cable owned the bank. Unless he was badly mistaken, this was just one more steal. Still, even if he had proof at this late date, what could he do to assure justice to Jinny Landers, living now in virtual poverty? He too, was a part of this vicious machinery of lawlessness.

6

KING STEELE had dropped a word here and there during the day. Small words, rightly placed, like pebbles tossed into a pool; they had set up vibrations which had spread to the extreme edges of the town. A few of the men spoke to others in turn. So that by evening, when thirty-odd in all gathered in the back room of one of the saloons, Steele could afford for the most part to keep silent and let others do the talking. He had already done his where it counted.

Cable did most of it now. He waited to be persuaded, but since he was the biggest ranch owner and a substantial citizen, he received plenty of prompting. Sam McCarthy, another rancher and a man of unquestioned integrity, turned to him.

"What do you think about this, Cable? We all know what we're here for—to talk about organizin' ourselves as vigilantes. There's been some talk for quite a while, and it really got to rollin' after Sheriff Cassell was drygulched. But since then, you've got Orin Locke for our new star toter. And, considerin' the start he made today, looks like he's as good as reports say. Mebby he's a big enough man to handle the deviltry in this country by himse'f. Mebby he wouldn't welcome our organizin'. I don't know. Might look like we didn't have any trust in him or respect for law—which is what we want. What do you think about it?"

"There's a lot in what you say," Cable agreed thoughtfully. "Getting Locke as our sheriff will make a big difference; I'm sure of that. On the other hand, we all know that Cassell was a good sheriff, and a hard worker; and we know what happened to him. The way it seems to me, if we go ahead and organize now, with it understood that we're doing it to back up the law—well, Locke has a tough job. We might be able to give him some real help."

That, as Steele had expected, was the sentiment which prevailed. Organization was effected, much as Cable had previously discussed it with him. There was no question that Cable was clever—too clever. But for the present, everything was working out to Steele's satisfaction.

Cable was also well pleased. He returned home, to a light in the house and the tantalizing fragrance of fresh-made coffee. Reta greeted him with a smile.

"I knew you'd be hungry, so I fixed up a snack for the two of us," she explained, whereat, laying aside hat and coat, he eyed her with sudden wariness. Grant Cable was fond of this daughter of his. On her he lavished all that he had, and it was

for her, he assured himself, that he did the things he did, to make money. He had known poverty in his own boyhood, and he intended to leave her beyond any danger of want.

For all that, he knew that she did not usually sit up for his return from town nor take this much trouble—not unless she had something on her mind.

It came out over his second cup of coffee. "I think you're wonderful," she said. "To get a man like Orin Locke for sheriff here. He's made a wonderful start."

"Excellent," Cable agreed. "But it could be that you're somewhat prejudiced in favor of a Locke to begin with, eh, Reta?"

Reta colored slightly, but smilingly admitted the impeachment.

"I do like the Lockes," she agreed. "I think it's a shame there's been trouble between them. Somehow, this Orin Locke doesn't seem to fit all the things they used to say about him."

"He has a fine reputation as a law officer," her father conceded.

"I'm glad you're both on the same side," Reta said suddenly. "Some folks have been saying that you were too friendly with King Steele. Maybe this will show them that you aren't."

Cable eyed his daughter, startled. He was no fool, and so had been aware for some time that Steele took more than a casual interest in her. To him, that had seemed rather a good thing. It welded their own profitable partnership, and Steele was a personable sort of a man, with plenty of money.

"I was under the impression that you rather liked Steele," he observed.

The vehemence of her reply startled him again. "I don't; I hate him! And I don't trust him. I'm glad you're not associated with him."

* * *

Lying wakeful in bed, mulling over the conversation, Cable came to the conclusion that was what she had really wanted to tell him. Her hate and distrust of Steel surprised and disturbed him, but that she should go to such lengths to say so, to approve his being associated with a man of the reputation of Orin Locke, was even more upsetting. It sounded as if she might have been hearing rumors.

And if so, if people were talking, suspicious that Steele was not what he pretended to be, but was actually the crook that he was—then they would say the same things about himself. Cable blanched.

He had always been the sort of man he was, of deliberate choice. But, for Reta's sake, he preferred to be thought of as honest and respectable. There could be no question as to where she stood on that issue. She was inviting him to break with Steele—

And if I don't, mebby it's a question of breaking her heart! he thought unhappily.

Cable, contrary to his usual custom, did not sleep well that night.

RUMORS OF the organization of the vigilantes were about Highpoint the next morning. Locke, coming down to breakfast, heard them. His immediate personal problems had been solved by his appointment as sheriff. There was a cot in the room back of the office, and he slept there. That way he could always be handy when needed.

He paid no particular attention to the reports, for rumor had a way of running in a gold camp. Most of it was wildly distorted, as he had long since learned. Still, it was possible that some of the substantial citizens were growing disturbed at the mounting wave of lawlessness. Some of them might even suspect who the real leaders were. In that case, they would not put much credence in his appointment by those same men.

The matter of a new gold shipment out of camp was being discussed, scheduled for some time in the near future. That would be taken up with him, he supposed, and he smiled bleakly at the thought.

Whether it was these rumors of an aroused populace, or his own action of the day before, or both, which were having an effect, certain it was that Highpoint was on its good behavior today. No incident, even a

minor one, marred its tranquility. If Steele held conferences in his own office, that was nothing out of the ordinary. If he smiled behind his hand, even that was no matter for surprise.

Steele was taking his time, knowing that he would do well to move fast, but not to fast. This new vigilance committee was playing into his hands. He made his selection carefully, from among the men who had been present the evening before, men who had joined from the highest of motives. He was doubly careful to pick men who, he was sure, had no suspicion that his own motives were not the same as their own.

Shortly after mid-day several of these gathered in his office.

"I don't like to do this," Steele told them bluntly. "And there are two reasons for it, which I'm sure you men will appreciate. For one thing, I hate to entertain adverse suspicions of any of my fellow-citizens, or to take action against them. And in this instance, some might think that I was being actuated by jealousy."

He noted with secret amusement that his callers were impressed. Probably they didn't more than half understand the words he was using, but their very use contributed to their belief that he was a gentleman, and therefore of unimpeachable character.

"But we have found it to our mutual advantage to organize into a vigilance society, and if we're to be worthy of our name, we must take action where it seems to be required," he went on. "I don't feel that I should shirk my duty, merely for personal reasons, or because such a course is distasteful to me. On the other hand, I do not want to be directly involved in this particular affair myself, because I may be prejudiced. Maybe I am jealous of Ray Locke. If I am, you gentlemen will understand why."

They looked at him and at each other, startled at the name he had used. But they understood what he meant.

"So, to assure fairness, I am going to turn certain information which I have, over to you, for dispassionate judgment and investigation," Steele went on. "Certain reports have reached me. I haven't cared to act on them, as you will understand. But if they are true, then you should find it out—and act. If they aren't, then we should know that, so that Ray Locke can be cleared of any suspicion. Now here's what I suggest."

What he suggested was that Ray Locke was one of the road agents who had been causing so much trouble of late, and he had some good reasons for believing so. At least, they sounded convincing.

"Maybe he's all he appears to be, maybe not," Steele added. "But if he is guilty, then by following the tips that I've received, you'll probably find the proof. If you find it, then you'll know he is guilty, and know what to do. If you fail to find it, he'll have a clean bill of health. But we must know, one way or another, where everybody stands. And when we get the evidence of their implication, then the guilty must be dealt with accordingly. That's why we've organized."

The others agreed with him, feeling a new respect for the way he was handling this. And they agreed to ride out to the Wagon Wheel and find out, one way or another, that evening.

Steele opened his desk and brought out a soiled envelope, of cheap paper.

"I received this a few days ago," he explained. "It was slipped under my door—and any one of a hundred people might have done it. Or a thousand, for that matter. It tells where Ray Locke is supposed to have hidden part of the loot from at least three robberies. I had intended to turn this over to Sheriff Cassell—but you know what happened to him."

"I can't very well turn it over to our new sheriff. We all know that the Lockes don't get on together, but after all, Ray Locke is his brother. So it seems to be doubly a job for the vigilantes. Here's the letter—which is unsigned. And a map, showing the supposed hiding places. I hope, frankly, that you find nothing. But if you do—then you'll know what to do."

He watched them leave, and chuckled to himself.

7

AN OPPRESSIVE feeling of restlessness gripped Locke, leaving him moody and irritated. A sort of homesickness, enhanced by the nearness of the Wagon Wheel and the fact that it was forbidden to him. For seven years, he realized now, he had subsisted on the hope of going back, the belief that somehow, some day, matters would resolve themselves and be cleared up again. That hope now seemed gone.

But what Ray Locke wanted was no longer of much significance. Ray had tried to get him out of the country again, but by now Ray would know that he was staying as the sheriff. There was no reason why he should not at least ride out for another look at his old home, under cover of darkness.

It would be a melancholy pleasure. But it suited his mood. Locke rode unhurriedly, once darkness had closed over Highpoint. It was another moonlit night, somewhat less bright than before. He swung wide, looking over some of the ranch. Sleepy cattle lifted their heads at his passing, faintly curious. He turned toward the buildings, and observed that the bunk house was dark. That would mean that the crew were enjoying an evening in town, with the ranch practically deserted.

A horse nickered softly in the darkness, at sound of his own. Locke swung for a look at such a cayuse, and frowned thoughtfully. Here were six saddled horses, hidden in a coulee, tied to trees. No one seemed to be on guard, and he took a closer look.

Three of the six horses were branded, and all three brands were different. None were Wagon Wheel. This had a look he didn't like. Prowlers, on the night when they had probably known that the crew would be away. He moved toward the buildings now, and it seemed that his suspicions were verified, though by now these visitors were going openly enough.

There were several men in a group near the front door of the house, and apparently they had just called Ray to the door, were questioning him. Ray stood there, the door shut behind him, half-defiant, but a curiously subdued Ray, as his words and voice denoted. They came clearly to Locke's ears as he paused, back just out of sight.

"Maybe I am," Ray said slowly. "Maybe I am a thief. What you got on your minds?"

That was a strange confession, coming from Ray. But the answer was equally startling, to both the Lockes. "So you admit it, eh? It's as well you do, for we got the goods on you, Ray. We been havin' a look around, and we found plenty."

Ray seemed surprised. Genuinely so, Locke thought. "I don't know what you're talkin' about," he said. "You found plenty of what? Where?"

"Plenty of loot from some of the robberies, and we found it right where you'd cached it. Take a look. Here's a purse I've seen plenty of times—it belonged to Rarus O'Toole. Rarus was stopped on the road about a month ago and robbed of two thousand dollars, as you'll remember, and when he didn't have more than that, he was shot and left for dead. He told about it before he died, after being found—how he was murdered for no good reason. We found this pocketbook and a lot of other stuff in the bottom of a manger out in the barn, down under a plank!"

They showed the purse, a long red leather one. Locke remembered Rarus O'Toole, recalled having seen the purse many times in the years before he had left Highpoint. It could not readily be mistaken.

"And here's stuff from Conway's place," the speaker went on. "A gold watch that Mis' Conway always carried when she came to town. A brooch with a diamond in it. And we found near a thousand dollars, cash, in another part of the barn, besides some gold dust. What you got to say about that?"

Ray had listened, bewildered and incredulous at first, then with rising anger. "Is this what you were talkin' about?" he demanded. "You tryin' to

accuse me of stealin' these things—of being one of the outlaws?"

"This is your place, ain't it? And we found these things hid out."

Ray regarded them bitterly. "Who sent you snooping around?" he demanded. "What right do you think you've got to come on my place, anyhow?"

Tempers, kept in check at first, were rising on both sides. The answer was impatient. "We got plenty of right—not that any's needed to deal with your kind. But we're from the vigilance committee that's been organized—and we aim to put a stop to this sort of thing!" The speaker gestured with the red pocketbook.

LOCKE WAS surprised at the answer and Ray appeared equally so. "Vigilance committee?" he repeated. "I hadn't heard of anything like that."

"If you was to live much longer, you'd hear of a lot of things," was the significant retort. "I reckon you've a right to know what that we've a right to do this, though. Like I say, we're vigilantes, and actin' for the law—"

"Law?" Ray's lip curled. "You sound like it! I happen to know that there's a new sheriff in the country, and he has a reputation for doing his own jobs. He didn't send you."

"You're damn right he didn't send us. Whether he'd come after you if he know about this, I wouldn't know. From what I hear of him, likely he would—but it's a chore he wouldn't relish, same as a lot of others that need doing, and we're going to help clean up this country. We're givin' you a chance to talk. Better make use of it!"

If Ray was nervous, he did not show it. Locke felt a thrill of half-unwilling admiration for his coolness.

"I'd like to hear some more about your side of it," Ray returned. "Where do you think you get the authority? And how did you know so well just where to look to find stuff that I didn't know was hid around here? I'd like to know."

One of the other men, silent up to now, supplied the answer.

"Steele told us—"

"Shut up, you fool!" the spokesman hissed, but the damage had been done. Ray's face darkened.

"Steele, eh?" he nodded grimly. "That's about what I'd expect. The man's a crook, and everybody knows that he hates me. And you run like lackeys when he snaps his fingers!"

That was the wrong tack. Partly because it was the truth, it angered them. The spokesman retorted harshly. "Insultin' us ain't going to do any good. Steele didn't send us. He'd received a letter accusin' you, and tellin' where you had stuff hid. He wanted us to be mighty careful to get the facts, and be sure of what we was doing, in case you was innocent. But so far's I'm concerned, I've seen plenty. You admit, when we ask you, that you're a thief. Then you abuse us when we ask you about this loot we found. I reckon we've heard enough."

For a moment, Ray's face was a study. As though he had temporarily forgotten about that first incriminating answer. "You fools," he said bitterly. "I thought you was talking about something else—"

"Take his gun," the leader said wearily. "I reckon we've all the evidence that's needed. We're stringin' you up—"

Up to then, no gun had been drawn, no hostile act performed on either side. They outnumbered Ray six to one, and he knew that the crew probably would not return for hours—not soon enough to be of any help. But now, as they closed in on him, he had no intention of submitting tamely. All at once he went into action, leaping to meet them. His fist caught one man and flung him back, completely off the porch. He rammed into a second with his head, butting like a goat, catching him in the stomach, knocking him sprawling and windless.

Even then, with the others piling on him in a pack, he was far from subdued. He fought like a wild man, and Locke, in the background, watched with increasing admiration. He had suffered a lot at the hands of this half-brother of his in years gone by, had found him completely unrepentant when he had returned. For

the moment, at least, he was content to be a bystander, to listen and see what happened and to learn what he could.

Already he had learned one or two things of considerable interest. A vigilance society had really been formed, apparently since his return, and Steele was a prime mover in the organization. That told him plenty, though he had an idea that these men were probably sincere enough, with no suspicion that they were being duped.

From their point of view, he could hardly blame them now. Ray acted guilty, the weight of evidence was against him, and there had been plenty in the past to make men suspicious of him. That strange admission at the start, that maybe he was a thief—it was hard to understand, but it had seemed to them to be a confession.

The fight had become a wild melee. It had rolled off the porch on to the ground, and all seven men were mixing it, the six together apparently not enough to subdue Ray in his wild frenzy. He realized clearly enough that to be captured now was to be lynched. If they had entertained ideas of a fair and careful trial at the start, before taking any drastic action, that notion had been driven out by anger. Convinced now by his resistance that he was guilty, they would lose no time in stringing him up, if they could.

It was a sizeable if. Half of the six were just about out of the fight, and it looked almost as if Ray, single-handed, might lick the bunch of them. Locke's admiration was steadily increasing. He had had to learn in a hard school himself, these last seven years, and he could appreciate the struggle that Ray was putting up.

Then a gun cracked, spiteful and vicious. Whether it was deliberate, or a weapon discharged accidently in the melee, Locke was not sure. But it was decisive. Ray sagged suddenly, the fight was over. Locke took a few quick steps forward, halted again. Ray was wounded. Just how badly, he had no way of knowing. What would they do now?

THERE WAS no delay in the answer to that question. They had been manhandled and all but defeated by one man, and that rankled. The leader, panting for breath, gave the order. "Get the rope over the limb o' that nearest tree," he ordered. "We'll string him up."

He turned then, goggling in amazement as Locke stepped forward.

"We'll have none of that," Locke said sharply. "If there's any arresting to be done, I'll do it!" He dropped quickly on his knees beside Ray, outstretched now on the ground, white-faced and unconscious. Fear gnawed at him as he examined the wound. It was ugly—a shot through the stomach. It could easily be fatal, and it was sure to be serious.

For a few moments he worked fast, applying such first aid measures as experience had taught him in plenty of shooting cases. The first thing to do was check the bleeding, and he partially contrived to do that. Working so, with Ray lying white and still, it was almost as if the last bitter years were swept away and they were boys again. A wave of tenderness swept him, such as he had not felt in years.

"Here," he said gruffly, still intent on his task. "He needs to be on a bed. Get something for a stretcher, and make it fast. And one of you burn leather getting to town and bring back Doc Bannon. If you can't find him, get Emery. But move!"

He looked up then, struck by the sudden stillness. Then he stared and swore. Sobered by his appearance, suddenly aware that they were working outside the law and that they had, perhaps, murdered a man, the self-styled committee had undergone a change of heart. Taking advantage of his preoccupation, they had slipped silently away. Now he was alone with Ray.

Which meant that they would not be going for a doctor, nor had any of them remained to lend a hand. Whatever was to be done was up to him. Locke hesitated. Then grim-faced, he stood up, stooped and lifted Ray's inert form as gently as possible. He

crossed the porch and kicked open the door. In such manner, after seven years, he reentered the old house again.

8

THERE was no light in the house. Probably his father was asleep. Deaf as he was, the elder Locke would not have been likely to have heard the disturbance, with the possible exception of the gun shot. Whether he was awake now, he was also blind, and so would be helpless, forced to wait until some one came to tell him what was going on.

Such waiting could be agony, but it would have to last a while longer; for the moment Ray had to come first. Despite the gloom, memory served Locke well. He came to a bedroom and went in, lowering Ray carefully on to the bed. Then he found a coal-oil lamp on the stand and lit it.

Now he could work, and he did his best. In the kichen range there was still some fire, and the tea-kettle, singing softly, was half full of hot water. He cleaned the wound and bandaged it, making a compress to completely check the bleeding.

He hesitated at what to do next. To ride to town and bring Bannon would take hours, and it might be as bad to leave Ray alone so long as to wait and do what he could for him, and when the crew returned, despatch a messenger for the medico. The odds were long, either way.

But there was good reason for staying. There was the possibility that those vigilantes might return. And his father, if awake would wonder why Ray did not come to tell him what was going on. Perhaps his father could stay with Ray while he went to town.

Picking up the lamp, Locke started through the silent house, half-eager, half-dreading the meeting. Ray Locke senior was a man of strong convictions and equally strong passions. Always he had favored his younger son—probably because of the untimely loss of the boy's mother.

He had been shocked and outraged by the discovery, which he had not questioned, that Orin Locke was a thief. Even the return of the supposedly stolen money had made no difference. It had, according to Dr. Emery, saved his life by maintaining his belief in the son he loved best.

If his act of sacrifice had saved his father's life, it had been worth it. But Orin Locke had gone away with a curse ringing in his ears. Now—how would he be received? How could he explain what had happened tonight, without a shock which might be as deadly as a similar one seven years back?

Here was the room. A closer look at the gaunt figure on the bed shocked him. These years had aged the older man far more than he had expected.

His father was awake, looking at him. It took a moment for Locke to realize that he could not see. Then his voice came, and the words told that, with the acute sense of the blind, he had known that it was not Ray who had entered the room.

"Who is it?"

Locke hesitated. Then he set the lamp on the stand.

"It's me—Pa," he said. "Orin."

He waited, uncertain what to expect, not even sure that the deaf ears had heard. Then, to his suprise, he saw a white, veinous hand groping toward him, a transfiguring smile on the wasted face. The voice was almost a whisper. "Orin! Thank Gawd, boy—you've come back! Come closer."

Incredulity and relief were Locke's immediate reactions. Whatever he had expected, this was the last thing that he had been prepared for; He squatted beside the bed, taking his father's thin hand in his own.

"Pa! You're not mad at me, then—any more?" The years rolled back.

The gray head on the pillow moved in slow negation. "No, Orin, I'm not mad—not any more, son. I—I want to ask your forgiveness—for what I said and thought about you; I found out the truth—tonight."

Something had been happening

here tonight, before he came, before the vigilantes had arrived. That would account for the strangeness in Ray, his subdued manner at first, perhaps even for his admission that he might be a thief.

"I've been doing a lot of thinkin', lately," his father went on, his voice little above a whisper. "I began to see that I'd been blinded by prejudice, that a lot of things just didn't fit. I—guess I never did give you a square deal, son. I'm sorry about it. You always was a good boy—a real Locke; I want you to know that I know that. I've been lyin' here tonight—prayin' that you'd come so I could tell you—before it was too late."

"It's all right, Pa," Locke muttered. "I understand."

"I'm glad you do, Son. Ray—he sure fooled me. I guess he fooled himself, too. He ain't all bad—he's got some good in him. I heard you was back, that you was the new sheriff. And I got to wonderin'. Tonight I asked Ray—told him I wanted the truth, and what I had figured out."

OLD RAY Locke was silent a while, and a shadow of pain across his face. Then, gathering his strength, he went on. "He gave it to me—that it was the way I'd guessed. That he had gambled, and stole that money. Not you. You paid the debt—and took the blame—partly for him, mostly for me. I—never guessed you thought so much of your pa as all that."

"You've always meant a lot to me, Pa," Locke said huskily, thinking of those days when, a small motherless boy, there had existed a real comradeship between the two of them.

"I sure was a fool—to think such things about you, Son, and to treat you like I did. I—wanted you to know. I been tryin' to fight down the pain—around my heart—to keep alive till I could tell you—"

His voice faltered. The fingers clutched convulsively at Locke's hand, grew lax again. Startled, Locke looked closer, felt for the pulse. There was none, but there was a look of peace on the wasted face.

For a moment he hesitated, stunned. Events were crowding, tripping over their own heels tonight. The pattern of what had happened was understandable. Tonight's revelation, even if it was what he had come to believe, had been hard on the weakened old man. The shock had been too much.

It was plain that his father had had no inkling of the other events of the evening, apparently had not heard the gunshot. Probably he thought that Ray had sent for Orin and he himself had been fighting to keep alive until he arrived. Now, with that one last job done, there had been nothing to keep him.

Perhaps it was just as well. Locke looked up, and for the first time in years it seemed to him that there might be, must be, something beyond this, something better. There had been little of faith in him during the last several years, faith in himself or in his fellow men; but now he found that faith had been reborn. His father had realized his mistake, tried to make amends. And now that this had happened, Orin Locke knew that whatever had made it impossible for him to believe in his fellow-men had been removed. He could judge sanely now...

Slowly he stood up, then moved back. For the moment, in these new revelations, he had almost forgotten Ray. But now the problem was back, intensified. There was still no sound of any crew returning, no one to help; but that didn't lessen the need.

There was no noticeable change in Ray's condition. He'd have to leave him, have to ride and find Bannon and fetch him. The fact that Ray, at the last, had been man enough to admit the truth to their father, to clear him in the old man's eyes, made him think more kindly of his brother. It was that which Ray had been thinking of, the theft of long years back, when he had conceded that maybe he was a thief. Apparently he was beginning to really think, for the first time in years.

Entirely aside from the gunshot wound, Ray needed a doctor. The fight had been bitter while it lasted, one man against six. There was a cut

on his scalp, bruises all over him. No telling how badly he might be hurt. Locke dared delay no longer. To ride for help was the lesser of two evils.

He blew out the light, turned toward the door, and stopped. He had heard something. Was someone coming back? The crew, perhaps?

There was no repetition of the sound. Yet he had a feeling that something was wrong. Then he caught the smell of smoke, followed by the crackle of flames from the rear of the house. Dry brush had been piled on the porch against the door, and lighted. It flamed as if soaked with coal-oil.

Locke wheeled, raced toward the front of the house again, where another pile of brush had been shoved against the door and lit also. A third fire was on the side of the house, all three spreading fast. Rage mounted, but he fought it down, knowing the need for coolness.

Was this the work of that self-styled vigilance committee, or others? They didn't intend that anyone should leave here alive. It was cowardly, but there was one thing to be thankful for. His father was mercifully beyond any hurt from the flames. But with himself and Ray, it was a different matter.

He'd have to get outside, with Ray, and soon. Moving his brother again was not a good thing for the injured man, but it was necessary. Locke dashed into the bedroom, flung open the window, then picked Ray up as gently as possible.

The flames were close enough, along with the moonlight, to give plenty of light. As he started to step through, a bullet shattered the top glass of the window, striking almost beside his head.

LOCKE dodged back instinctively, flinching away from the impact of the bullet. That had not been intended as a warning, to drive him back into the burning house—it had been aimed to kill, but the flickering uncertain light and his own moving body had caused a near miss.

Back inside, he hesitated, and a frenzy of despair gripped him. If he had been alone he could have chanced it still, running fast, shooting back at whoever was out there. The odds would have been against him, but he might make it. With each second of delay, however, the chances of failure grew as fast as the fire spread. Not only would it soon trap him if he remained, condemning him to a fearful death, but as its light blotted out the last patches of shadow, the gunman beyond would have a perfect target which he could not miss.

And the killer would need only to keep back in the shadow, beyond the fringe of light, to pick him off at his leisure if he tried to run for it.

Still, alone, he would have a fighting chance. But he wasn't alone. Ray was here, and in desperate condition. To run with him was to be shot down. To remain meant that they both would die. Yet he couldn't desert Ray now, in this extremity; Ray had played the part of a man tonight, had made at least partial atonement. The fight that he had put up had excited Locke's admiration.

This was a strange homecoming. The old house was doomed, and he and Ray with it unless he could get out fast. He might make it by himself, and, with more than excellent luck, he might be able to down the gunman in turn by locating him as he shot at him. Providing there was just one. With six, it would be hopeless.

But if there was just one, and he got out and got him, by then it would be too late to get back in and get Ray out.

Locke considered the odds, knowing in advance that he was going to stay. It wasn't one of those things to be decided pro or con. It had been decided for him already, like it or not. This looked like the end of the Lockes.

That was the logic of the situation. Already it was beginning to get hot, as the smoke and flames began to make themselves felt. The house was old, tinder-dry, and with several fires started all at once and the oil to speed them on their greedy way, it was burning fast. But despite logic, he was not ready to accept it or quit tamely. He stepped doggedly back to

He turned for a moment to look back, thankful now for that part of it. The buildings would all go. Nothing could save them. The savagery which would use such a method in an effort to kill was chilling. He had met some desperate men in his day, but mostly they were gunmen who faced an opponent fairly in a shoot-out. This other sort of thing, aimed against wounded men and invalids, was beyond the pale.

"I'm sorry," Reta murmered, and her voice told him how deeply moved she was. "I didn't know."

"It was his heart," Locke explained. "And a lucky thing, the way it's turning out."

They went in silence then, Reta walking beside him, leading the horse. Her ankle didn't seem to bother her unduly. Locke had both hands full, carrying Ray, trying to hold him comfortably as possible. It was wearisome, and doubly hard on the wounded man. There was always the possibility that a killer who had already gone to such lengths might go the rest of the way; that an ambush bullet might finish at any moment what had been started back there.

But nothing happened, nor was there any sign of the returning crew of the Wagon Wheel while they remained in sight of the burning house. It had never been a great distance across to the Three Sevens, but the miles seemed multiplied tonight, before they saw a light in a window. Reta stumbled ahead, limping worse now, to get things ready, and to despatch a man to town for the doctor.

GRANT Gable was not home. He arrived simultaneously with Fletcher Bannon, and the latter went to work at once. Locke had done a good job of stopping the bleeding in the first place, and it had not started again. But Ray still lay, unconscious, scarcely breathing. Locke did not need to be told how bad it was.

Cable joined him, presently, in another room, his face grave.

"This is bad business, Locke," he said. "Very bad business."

"You don't know the half of it," Locke returned gruffly, then looked sharply at him. "Or do you, I wonder?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand you."

"Probably you don't; I hope not. Your daughter's true-blue. On the other hand, Steele is involved in this—and you're mixed up with him."

Cable met his challenging gaze steadily. "I give you my word, Locke, that I don't know what this is all about."

Cable was an acknowledged head of lawless men, but Locke did not doubt his word now; there was a wide streak of decency in him as well, otherwise he could not have raised Reta as he had, with such a complete belief in him. The good and the bad in him were simply compounded a little differently than in most people.

"That's good enough for me," Locke conceded. "But I rode out to the Wagon Wheel tonight. There were six men there, who said they were vigilantes. They'd dug up some evidence—some loot—from different robberies. I don't doubt that they found it, all right, though I figure it was planted for them to find. Seems Steele had sent them and told them where to look for it."

Cable's eyes clouded. Even without what had happened, and he knew little enough of it, he could see the implications. He had known of the rivalry between Steele and Ray Locke, and the cause of it. That Steele would use the newly-formed committee of vigilance as an instrument for his private quarrels was startling, but it seemed that he had done so.

"They were going to lynch him then," Locke went on. "He put up a fight, and got shot. They'd still have strung him up, only I stepped in and put a stop to it." His eyes probed the other man's. "What about these vigilantes? What do you know of them?"

Cable hesitated. But he was profoundly shocked and disturbed, and after a moment he looked up again. "I don't blame you for feeling as you do, Locke," he said. "I helped organize the vigilantes. So did Steele. Our idea was that they would be organ-

ized anyway, and we'd be better off if we were in the bunch, instead of outside, with them working against us. But I give you my word that I knew nothing of this other. If Steele is using them for a private feud—and it has that sound—then he's doing it all on his own hook. *I* wouldn't do such a thing, against you Lockes; you've agreed to work with me—"

"I did," Locke cut in grimly. "But just because you had me over a barrel. That's out, now—since the barrel's smashed."

Cable looked surprised. "I don't understand that," he admitted. "But what I was going to say is, I knew that Reta liked Ray. You don't think that I'd do anything to hurt her, do you?"

"I think you're doing plenty to hurt her," Locke retorted. "She's no fool, and you're putting yourself over a barrel, whether you realize it or not. But I believe you, so far as Ray's concerned. As to what I meant, there was no more that happened at the Wagon Wheel." He went on to describe what it had been, and he saw horror mount in Cable's eyes at the recital.

"That's infamous," Cable exclaimed. "Whoever was responsible—. I'm sorry, Locke—I truly am. You've no idea who was doing it?"

"I'm pretty much stumped," Locke confessed. "That part of it just doesn't make sense. Unless there's a lot here that I still don't know about. But I aim to go back there and have a look around, and see what I can find, if anything. And now maybe you understand what I meant when I said you don't have *me* over a barrel, any longer. My father's dead. Ray's likely to be. I'm givin' you fair warning."

Cable considered that, and nodded soberly. "You can see that I wouldn't have overreached myself, and weakened my own position, in such a manner," he pointed out. "But I don't blame you, after what has happened. In a way, our positions are reversed—but I still don't blame you."

"I owe my life to Reta, and so does Ray, if he lives," Locke said. "I won't forget that, or how much she likes you. But I'm going to give you some advice, Cable, though most folks would rather castor oil. It's this: *Don't go along with Steele any longer!* Don't play the sort of game you have been playing, from here on out. You can make a break now—or be broken. And I don't mean by me, one way or the other. I'm thinkin' of Reta."

Cable was silent a long while. "I figured I was smart," he said finally. "That I had everything planned so that nothing could back-fire. Now—all that I'm sure of is that I'm in a mess like you say."

9

FLETCHER Bannon's face was set in lines of professional gravity when finally he came out of the sick room. He nodded to the three of them, for Reta had joined Locke and her father in the silent vigil. Bannon, Locke observed, was more nearly sober than usual.

"He's resting nicely, right now," he told them. "And that's what he needs—rest, a chance for nature to do its part. And nature, after all, is the great healer. All that we medicos can do, at best, is to lend a hand.

"I won't pretend that he's in good shape. It's far too early to tell how he'll get along. But there will be no change tonight, and watching beside him won't help him or you. So get some sleep, Reta. He'll need nursing, later, and if you're rested, you can do more for him. If you're riding, Orin, I'll go with you."

"I'm going past the Wagon Wheel first," Locke said.

"That suits me fine." Not until they were in the saddle did Bannon speak again. It was well past midnight now, the stars were high and remote. "What happened?" he asked.

Locke told him. Bannon whistled. "It's been a night, hasn't it?" he said. "For you, especially. And yet—none

so bad a night, in some ways, I guess."

Locke considered that, and knew what he meant.

"It might have been worse," he agreed.

"Much worse," Bannon nodded. "Mankind has divided into many tribes across the face of the earth, with many customs. Those things which we do ourselves, which are familiar to us, we look upon with more or less approval. Ways which are strange to our eyes we view dubiously. And yet all are customs of this our human race, all approved somewhere by useage and belief."

He squinted at the stars, nodded and went on. "There have been times, Orin, when I've lost faith in a God above us and rallied at human destiny, as though we were sands driven by the wind. But again I see the pattern of the stars—and here the pattern of life and death. I think to catch a glimpse of a plan into which all is fitted well save ourselves. And the lack there is our own stubborness and lack of understanding, not the plan nor its Maker. Some day we'll see more clearly. But what I started to say is, that all peoples and tribes believe in God, somewhere and under some name, and in life after death. Likewise they have many a strange and curious custom in preparing for burial, for transition to that life beyond.

"In ancient Egypt the custom was to mummify the corpse or build a vast pile of stone in which to shield the body through the ages until one day the soul should waken again. Indians of one tribe will elevate bodies on platforms, to get them as close to the life-giving sun as possible. Still others sink the bodies on weighted rafts to the bottom of a lake. In India they make a funeral pyre so that the soul may go freer from the confines of the body."

He turned in the saddle, and his voice was rich and comforting.

"The point I'm trying to make, Orin, is that what happens to the body is no great matter. It doesn't touch the vital spark of life, once that has gone out and on—to who knows what greater range across a far divide. Personally, I've always thought that the Hindus had hold of the original belief in a maze of custom and ritual."

Locke was comforted, as he knew that his friend had intended. By now they were in sight of where the buildings had stood on the Wagon Wheel. Only smoking embers remained, dully glowing. The conflagration had spent itself, a funeral pyre fit for a king. But this had come when it could do no hurt, to the tired man who had lived here. A little earlier it would have been different. It had been, in some ways, not so bad a night.

The crew had returned, and were watching uneasily, fearful for what had happened, blaming themselves for having been absent, unable to do anything tangible now. Some of them were new hands since Locke's day. Others had been on the Wagon Wheel while he was there.

He gave them an account of what had happened, questioning them. None of them knew anything about it; they had ridden in to town to make an evening of it, as was customary once a month. They had heard nothing out of the ordinary, suspected nothing until they returned. The knowledge that Ray Locke senior had been past all fear of the flame, that Ray had not been trapped in the house, reassured them to a degree.

"You boys will have to stick around and look after things," Locke told them. "Kempton, you'll be in charge for the present. Clear away the ruins and get new lumber, put up a bunk house first, then a new barn. Run things as usual."

Kempton had been with the ranch a long while. He was a good man, and could be depended on to assume responsibility.

"Sure," he agreed. "But—uh, most of us was supposed to ride south in the morning. Round-up down Red Creek way, beginning day after tomorrow. Men from several outfits going there. But now—well, I don't rightly know—"

"I didn't know about the roundup,

but go ahead," Locke instructed. "The other work can wait till you get back. We'll not hold funeral services here till Ray is able to attend. Under the circumstances, I think that's best."

Ray would want it that way. And for the present, Locke had a feeling that he was going to be busy with other matters.

He skirted the grounds, but it was too dark to see much. There was little doubt but that the killer who had lurked out here and tried to drive him back with bullets would be a long way off now. But, at about the spot where he knew the gunman must have stood when shooting at him, he found something—a small object such as might fall from a pocket.

Locke picked it up, studying it thoughtfully. There was no proof that it had belonged to the killer—save its location, and the unlikliness that it would have been the property of the crew or any usual visitor to the ranch. It was an elk's tooth with a gold mounting, for snapping on to a watch chain, and the catch was broken. This was not the sort of thing commonly owned by working cowboys.

He slipped it into his pocket and returned to where Bannon waited. "Ever see this?" he asked.

Bannon studied it curiously and shook his head.

"Seems to me I have," he conceded. "But I don't just remember when—or where. Sometimes my mind gets a little fuzzy."

They rode on to town. It was late—so late even that Highpoint had given up for the night and gone home. Bannon paused at the barn.

"I'll ride out and have another look at Ray during the day," he said. "He's got a pretty good chance—thanks to the job you did."

* * *

TIRED as he was, Locke could not sleep. Too much had happened which was personal to himself and his interests. He tossed for a while, then, as daylight came, shaved and went to a restaurant for a bite of breakfast. Few were astir at this hour, only an occasional swamper sweeping out a saloon, a mongrel dog prowling the garbage boxes. The glitter of early sun reflected back from one of these, and Locke looked more closely, spun about and moved across to it.

This was unusual garbage, to say the least. An object of considerable value, tossed out a window, apparently, and into the box. It was another elk tooth, and it needed only a closer look to confirm that it was the mate to the one he had found on the Wagon Wheel. Apparently the two of them had been joined together, and the fastening had broken.

That had happened, he was sure, out on the Wagon Wheel. Discovering the loss, back in town, the owner had been anxious to be rid of the other half of the trinket.

This anxiety to dispose of it was pretty good proof of a guilty conscience—a fear that the one part might be found and used for a clue. Chance had led him to this other half now. Here in a box near the rear of the *Wild Buttes Saloon*, King Steele's Saloon.

Dropping the second piece into his pocket, Locke went on, thoughtfully. There might be significance in that latter fact—or there might not. It could have been tossed out from a window, or by any passerby along the street. There was so much here which did not seem to fit.

* * *

But that was according to the way you looked at it. There are many impelling emotions. Love and hate; fear and greed. Not often does one trigger set off all these at once, like a bunch of firecrackers still tied to a center fuse. In the case of King Steele, exactly that had happened.

Still rankling over the knowledge of Reta Cable's feelings about himself, Steele had ridden out to Wagon Wheel, following some distance behind the six men he had sent as dupes to do his killing. He had arrived in time to witness their departure, and to observe that Ray

Locke was badly hurt. And to see the part which the sheriff took.

Already, this star toter who had been the terror of the lawless in more than one town, was showing signs of getting out of hand. Cable had been sure that he could control him, although Steele had been against it. Now that he no longer intended to work with Cable in any case, it was clear to Steele that the sheriff could quickly become a menace.

Locke knew that Steele had sent this vigilance commitee out here to frame his brother, and the sheriff would be likely to question them in more detail later—if given a chance. Far better to remove both these Lockes now, while the blame could conveniently be attached to the six. It was an opportunity which might not come again.

His mind made up, Steele had lost no time in putting the plan into operation. Queasy Creek ran only a stone's throw away, behind the barn. High up on its banks, cast there by a flood tide, was a big pile of driftwood, tinder-dry now. Plenty of brush handy to his purpose. And he knew where to find the coal oil can in the bunk house.

Only one thing had happened which he had not counted on. The appearance of Reta Cable and her boldly riding up to the house. For a moment, torn between jealousy and apprehension, Steele had crouched back in the shadows and fingered his gun indecisively. This job needed to be carried through to a conclusion, now that he had gone so far. But there was risk of hitting Reta if he shot again, as well as a likelihood that she might see who had fired the shot, if he killed the sheriff right beside her.

Steele's hand jerked down savagely, the butt of his gun caught on the watch chain and something tore. In the gloom, he paid it no attention. Only when, back in his office, he discovered the loss, did he realize what had occurred and how dangerous it might be. Swiftly he had raised the window, tossed the remaining part of the ornament out into the garbage.

Tired and savage, he finally lay down on a couch there in the office and slept, not too well. Sunlight in his eyes wakened him, and he looked out—in time to see the sheriff discover the broken bit of fob and pick it up.

For a moment, safely hidden inside, Steele watched, lips drawn back to reveal his teeth, eyes glaring. If there had been any doubt before, it was gone now. By his own act of the night, Steele knew that he had removed the last restraint which might have been placed on the sheriff. And, if Locke suspected the truth, as it seemed that he did, then he had made an implacable enemy of him.

Locke never guessed how close he stood to death. It would be easy to shoot through the window, to gun him down. Easy, and perhaps safer, in the long run. But to do so would involve questions which would be hard to answer, and such a cold-blooded murder would be difficult even for him to explain or gloss over. Killing Locke would remove one danger, but it might rouse Grant Cable, and he was not yet ready for that. Much better to dispose of both of them before they knew their danger, in more subtle ways.

But it was with the instincts of a beast at bay that Steele watched Locke go on down the street. He had gone too far now for half-way measures, and he knew it.

10

LOCKE slid on to a stool in the *Chuck House*, noting that there was just one other customer ahead of him. A man seated at one of the tables, sheltered behind a newspaper which he read with avid interest. A paper with date-line a month old, but new

here in Highpoint.

He was turning back to his order when the paper was lowered. For a moment the two men stared in mutual surprise. Then Locke was off the stool, the other man was out of his chair, a bristling red beard of several day's growth thrust forward, horny hand outstretched.

"Orin Locke!" he grinned. "You old sinner, you! When'd you hit this country?"

"Where you been keepin' yourself, Red?" Locke returned. "Is all the news you get as old as in that paper? I been back two-three days. What you doing in this neck of the woods?"

"I'm drivin' stage," Red Foley explained. "Been earnin' my livin' by ridin' around and enjoyin' the scenery for quite a spell. But you're a sight for sore eyes, Orin."

They talked, recalling their last meeting, which had been three years before and a thousand miles away.

"Remember, I was all for headin' back this way and you comin' with me?" Foley recalled. "Only you wouldn't come. I said I'd head up across Nebraska and be back in a month."

"Looks like you made it," Locke agreed.

"Sure I made it—in ten months," Foley conceded. "I kind of got stuck down in Nebraska. I'll tell you all about that, first chance I get. Right now, I got to tend to some things."

It was heartening to run on to another old friend, and Locke was momentarily lifted out of his somber thoughts. But they returned in full flood when he was on the street again.

But others were early abroad as well. A voice hailed, and he turned to see Jinny.

"Isn't it a glorious morning?" she said, and then stopped at sight of his face. "Why, what's happened, Orin?"

He told her, and she listened in quick sympathy.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she breathed. "If—if there's anything that I can do to help—any time—you must let me."

"I'll remember," he promised, and went on, comforted by her concern. After a visit to his office he rode out to the Three Sevens, and was surprised to find Bannon already there.

"Thought I'd have a look," Bannon explained. "And there were a few more things I needed to do, anyway. He must have given quite an account of himself in that fight, before they got the decision. There are contusions and bruises all over him."

There was no particular change in Ray's condition, but Bannon was cheerful about that.

"He's doing fine, just the way he is," he said. "While he's unconscious he's quiet. A restless patient can do himself a great deal of harm. I remember one time I had to hypnotize one particularly bad case to give nature a chance."

"Did that work?"

"Perfectly. Not feeling pain, he lay quietly, and recovery was rapid. You see, there was no one to nurse him, and something had to be done. Had there been anyone, they would probably have mobbed me for such treatment. But the patient recovered."

Locke knew what his friend meant. More than once he had gotten into trouble by venturing to try some new and, to his audience at least, unorthodox method of treatment. But Locke was willing to trust him with Ray, whatever he might want do do. Results were what counted.

Grant Cable had ridden for Red Creek with the most of his crew, to take part in the roundup. Locke guessed that he would be glad of a good excuse for being away for a few days. It would help to postpone a decision which might lead to a show-down.

BACK IN town, Locke observed certain quiet activity on a side street. A lumber wagon was pulling out, a canvas tarp thrown carelessly over the load in the box, the horses trotting easily with the

weight of it. Outwardly there was nothing different about this than with plenty of other wagons, nothing to excite much interest.

But several men on horseback were picking this particular time to leave town also, some riding far ahead of the wagon, as though intent on business of their own. Others followed after it, though keeping well back.

No one had bothered to tell him just what was going on, but Locke had heard enough to be reasonably sure. This was the gold shipment, being started, and these riders were the vigilantes who intended to guard it. With such an escort, it should be safe enough.

Providing that everything worked as planned. Locke was too old a hand at this sort of game to have much confidence that it would do so, when Steele and perhaps Cable would have a hand in the planning. There was supposed to be at least fifty thousand dollars worth of gold in that shipment, and that was a tempting sum.

Locke pulled up as the stage prepared to leave town, observing that Red Foley was on the box, handling the reins for six horses with expert ease. Two men came out from the office, carrying a wooden box which seemed to be heavy, and lifted it up to the boot. There was nothing there to attract any particular attention, but one fact was noteworthy. There were no passengers getting on today.

That could be a coincidence, even a natural occurrence. But Locke didn't believe it was either. Usually there were several to ride the stage west and south from here. If it ran empty today, there was, to his mind, a similitude to rats which had already left a sinking ship.

The stage, ostensibly, was carrying a dummy shipment of gold. The real shipment was supposed to be in that lumber wagon which had left some time before. It looked as if all this must be an open secret. For everyone should know, such being the case, that the stage would be allowed to go through safely, without molestation.

But, whatever the apparent facts, no one was risking riding the stage today.

Foley waved a hand, settled himself, kicking off the brake, and let his horses run. The six yanked the lightly laden stage along as though it was a feather in the breeze. Locke turned down a side street, swung his cayuse, and rode out of town. He took a short-cut, and was alongside the road when Foley came in sight, two miles farther along.

At his wave, Red pulled the horses to an easy trot, and Locke swung his cayuse alongside. "I think I'll ride with you, Red," he suggested. "Strikes me it might be a good idea."

"Sure." Foley's grin was broad and pleased. "Whoa, there!" He pulled the horses to a stop, kicking on the brake, as Locke dismounted and left his own horse. "Hop right up with me, Orin. I dunno what you got on yore mind, but I'll sure be glad of comp'ny."

"I think I'll ride inside," Locke retorted. "I'd rather be up with you. But if anything happens, it might work better, down inside."

"What you figure's likely to happen? This is a dummy express box I'm carryin' today. You know the real load's gone on ahead, don't you?"

"Yeah, I know," Locke agreed drily. "And from the signs, everybody else in the Wild Buttes knows all about it, too."

Foley spat thoughtfully, holding the restive horses with a practised hand. "You figure there's some shennanigan somewhere?" he asked. "If I'm stopped, I'm supposed to let 'em have it without no trouble."

"You do that," Locke agreed. "Your job is to drive the stage." He settled himself comfortably inside, closed the door. "Since they didn't provide you with a gun-guard, you'll be doing all that's expected of you."

"Dang it, Orin, you're gettin' me nervous as an old maid peerin' under the bed," Foley protested. "I'm halfway believin' mebby there'll be somethin' under it, even when I'm danged sure there can't be. You got

a hunch?"

"Mebby we better say I got time on my hands."

And a pair of hawg-legs at yore hips," Foley grunted. "Well, if there should be anything, there's nobody I'd rather have to side me than you, Orin. I'm going to be kind of regretful about leavin' this country, now."

"How do you mean?"

"This is my last trip, drivin' stage," Foley explained. "Then I'm going back to Nebraska. Got me a girl, at Scott's Bluff. That's what took me so long when I come through that way. Ever see that big bluff, risin' up there like a sore thumb, Orin?"

"I've never been that way."

"Some bluff. Wide an' solid. Going to admire it more'n usual when I see it this time. Gettin' married when I get there. Her pa, he runs a blacksmith shop, and I'll be workin' with him. That's the way she wants it. No hills to speak of, or dug roads twistin' a mile high above nothin', like out this way, but I'm a pretty fair hand at fittin' a shoe to a filly's foot. Only thing is, I kinda hate pullin' out of here, just as you get back to the country. We used to have some good times together."

HE RELAPSED into meditative silence, intent on his job. And a man tooling a stage along these roads had to be watchful as well as skillful. Mountain dug roads, such as this one through the Wild Buttes, were no boulevard.

And these were the real Wild Buttes, from which the country had taken its name. The few comparatively level miles of country, which led off to the ranches lying west, were behind them now. Queasy had wandered off there and then swung guiltily back again, and, as though with a secret to hide, was trying to lose itself now in the depths of these hills, were the road climbed and twisted.

The breath of pine came from below as well as above them, a waterfall, fed partly by a spring, partly by melting glaciers, took a wild leap off at the side. It plunged and broke, before gathering itself together again to hurry breathlessly to a junction with the yellow thread of Queasy Creek. Highpoint was miles behind now, and save for the single evidence of the road, there was little sign here that man had ever penetrated this wilderness.

It was only a few miles farther to a mountain meadow and a log station with corrals behind it, where a fresh team would be hooked into the traces. The dull rumble of Queasy came up from a deep-walled gorge far below, where it fought its way along a boulder-studded course. Then, out in the sun again, was riotous across a meadow.

A deer watched from a point above the road, then moved leisurely away. A hawk floated in the still air off at the side—high above the valley floor, but below where the stage toiled now. Locke's ears popped with the rarified air.

"Sure going to miss this," Foley called back. "I plumb hate it, drivin' a road like this, but it kinda gets in yore blood. Oh well, sometimes I can climb the bluff and call it a hill—"

They were among the trees now, straight-reaching pines with a girth that a man could barely reach around, close-growing on either side of the road. The dizzy depths of the valley which had showed a moment before were shut away as they rounded a turn, and, exclaiming under his breath, Red Foley kicked on the brake and swung his weight hard on the reins.

It was a matter of no choice. A log was across the road, toiled laboriously into place, Locke guessed, by saddle-ponies straining at drag ropes. One end was elevated into the crotch of another half-fallen tree, forming a solid, formidable barrier to further progress.

The trees were massive here, their tops uniting to shut away most of the light, so that there was scant undergrowth. Wide reaches of forest aisle were carpeted deep with the brown needles of the ages, and Locke knew that the other wagon had not passed this way. Probably it had

taken a side road, miles back.

But men had raised this barrier and waited in a sure confidence for the coming of the stage, and now they were ready for it. Locke saw two of them, stepping out from behind trees as the stage stopped with squealing brakes. One of them raised a rifle to cover the man on the box. That, of course, was only a normal precaution.

But he did not stop with that. Even as the gun came up and the black barrel centered, it seemed to split asunder in a roll of lancing flame. The splitting was purely illusion, caused by the half-dark of the shadows under these massive trees. But the thunder and the hurtling lead were no illusion.

A look of hurt, of incredulity and unbelief, was spreading across the face of Red Foley. Both hands on the reins, he had been too busy with stopping and controlling the team to do anything else, even had he been so inclined. None of that had made any difference.

A red gash started at his chin and spread upward, almost splitting his face, where the heavy bullet had coursed, spreading. Foley pitched drunkenly, hands loosing their clasp upon the reins. He struck the rump of the left wheeler and bounced while the horses started nervously, then hit the ground and rolled, to lie in a sprawling heap.

11

SILENCE descended momentarily as the echoes of the gun rolled and muttered among the further canyons and on to oblivion across the ridges. Locke crouched, shocked by the wanton brutality of that completely unnecessary murder, the bitter abruptness of it. One thought obtruded in his mind.

It's your last trip, all right, Red—but you'll never leave the hills for the bluffs of Nebraska!

"What'd you want to go kill him for?" the second man demanded, and his voice held shock and anger. Both outlaws had paused. They each wore masks, bandanas draped below their hats to cover their faces, with slits cut for eye-holes. A wisp of smoke curled lazily from the muzzle of the rifle. The team trembled and stomped uneasily, but with the barrier of the log directly in front of the leaders, and the big trees growing close on either side, they could do nothing but stand.

"A dead dog don't yap!" was the gruff response, and it seemed to Locke that there was something familiar about the voice. "Now we won't be bothered. What the—"

Apparently he had seen something, or thought he had. Or perhaps it was the finely-drawn perception of nerves stretched tight which sent some warning along the ganglia. He started to swing the muzzle of the rifle toward the door of the stage, and Locke had to shoot.

This was a business he hated. Life was a gift beyond the power of man to bestow, though any beast with a gun might take it away in an ill-considered instant. Locke had had overmuch of that sort of thing in the past. But here there was no choice, and in this instance it was like stomping a deadly snake.

There was a pattern of savagery in the outlawry here, a tracery begun the other evening back at the Wagon Wheel. Every new development showed the ruthlessness of the master-hand which guided. Here it was kill or be killed.

That was for Red Foley—*and for the girl who would wait in vain for his return.* But even as he squeezed the trigger, Locke's suspicion that there would be more than these two on the job was confirmed. There was movement off at the side, not made by waiting horses. A glint of light rippling on a gun-barrel.

Now they knew that he was here—and with one man dead on both sides, it would be a fight to the finish!

His hunch had been right. The gold was here, in this supposed dummy shipment; they had made sure of that. And the orders for the attack, including the elaborate farcery of the wagon and its escort, would have originated in that office at the rear of the *Wild Buttes Saloon*.

The man who had killed Foley, whom he had shot in turn, pitched wildly sidewise. An outreaching branch caught his mask and tore it aside, exposing his face. Toomy Harris, of the Wagon Wheel. Toomey, who had tried to murder Locke in town the other night—who had said that the reason was obvious.

But now Locke was beginning to understand. Apparently Toomey Harris was one of the regular outlaws, who took his orders from Steele. That explained a lot, including how the loot had been hidden on the Wagon Wheel.

It also went a long way toward absolving Ray from that attempt of the other night. That information was as pleasant as it was enlightening.

But there was no time to think about such matters. The other two men who had put in an appearance were running, crouching low. They did not know how many guards might be inside the stage, and that could be vital. They had been sure that no passengers were along today, and this development had caught them off-guard, but not much. Now this second pair intended to slip around to where they could pour bullets into the stage from the far side, while their companion controlled it from this one.

If they got there, it would be disastrous. This made four of them—and there might be others. Locke swung his gun and drove two quick shots, and knew that he had missed. But the bullets checked their rush, at least for the moment. By then, however, the other man had leaped back to the cover of a tree, and was shooting with cold deliberation to spray his lead through the door, low down.

The horses were stamping and jerking restively, but that was all they could do. But lead was coming through the flimsy panels of the door without noticable obstruction, and to stay in here was to be riddled or trapped. Locke crawled back and through the opposite door, and as he pushed it shut again another bullet crashed through it where he had been only an instant before.

He glimpsed a man, dodging from one tree to another, and snapped a shot. Bullets drove back at him from two angles, kicking up dead pine needles in a small eruption, stirring the solid dirt underneath. But the running man had sprawled in a stumbling slide, and there were no more new guns joining in. The odds had been whittled down by half.

But the two remaining had learned caution, as well as a healthy respect for their opposition. They knew by now who he was, of course—the sheriff. And Orin Locke was no man to trifle with.

THEY WOULD aim to come at him from opposite sides, doing it with all the stealth and skill they possessed. That way, one of them would be pretty sure to get him. Locke glanced up at the trees overhead, and reluctantly abandoned the thought of climbing to a perch. With smaller trees, or low-growing branches, it might have been worth the risk while they were getting into new positions. Here it was impossible. The trees were too big, with no branches for thirty or forty feet up.

The absence of undergrowth made it better for his enemies. A bold game here would be less risky for him than a waiting one. Locke shrugged out of his coat and draped it on a stick, and stood that beside the trunk of the tree, like a man crouching low. He set his hat carefully to top it, and so far nothing had happened. Then he moved, almost crawling, off to the side. Twenty feet away was a slight depression, and he crouched in it, burrowing among the waste.

The horses had ceased to stamp and snort, the silence of the big trees crept back again as though it

had never been broken. Then a gun tore it apart, three quick shots as fast as a man could squeeze the trigger. One of them had seen where he crouched.

But the shots were mostly on guesswork, and betraying in turn. Locke swung the muzzle of his own gun, and fired once, with no waste of lead. He swung the gun again, to where the remaining outlaw, a hundred paces to the opposite side, was incautiously moving into the open, confident that it was all over.

It came close to being, for him, but now quite. Locke saw then that it was to be no gun duel between them—not if the one man remaining could help it. He had seen what had happened to his companions, and he had no stomach for continuing what had become now a matter of even odds. Locke sent two more shots after him as he ran, but the range was long, the trees close together off there, and the light which filtered down from above was deceptive.

As Locke had guessed, the outlaw was running for the horses which the quartet had ridden to this place, and had left off there. Locke heard the pound of hoofs before he could get close enough to see. He had one glimpse of the man on horseback, and then he was gone.

The horses which the others had ridden were still there, of course. But he had been in too big a hurry to turn them loose or take them with him. He was one scared hombre, for the present.

But Locke knew pretty well what the outlaw's next move would be. Safely out of gun-shot, finding that he wasn't being pursued, he would think coolly again. Likely he knew his way around, in these mountains—probably better than Locke did. When you used hills for hide-outs, it made a complete course.

The odds were long that there would be other outlaws in some of those hide-outs, and he would lose no time in getting to them and returning with help. The gold was still waiting for whoever could take it.

It was the gold which decided Locke. He was sheriff, and that gold was a part of his job. More than that, it was a key to the bigger fight he had on his hands, for this all tied in together. The attempt at murdering Ray and himself, the killing, so far as the wearer of the elks' teeth had known at the time, of a blind, helpless old man caught in an inferno.

He went back to the stage, and after a moment's hesitation, lifted Red Foley and loaded him inside, where he had ridden on the trip out to Highpoint. Considering the miles between, he knew that he'd have need of luck.

For one thing, he had a team which had already gone their distance. But the road was impassable for going ahead, so he must go back. He gathered up the reins and climbed to the box, and then backed the team, no easy matter with the big trees close on both sides as they were. It was necessary to back a ways, then go ahead half a length, into the deeper gloom between the big trees, to where he could back again. It was slow, calling for skill in such restricted quarters, but presently he had the stage turned.

The horses were rested and anxious to run, as leery of the place as himself, anxious to put distance between. Tooling a stage along these roads was a job for a master reinsman like Foley, but Locke had been raised in the hill country and he knew horses. His chief worry for the moment was whether the outlaws would come upon him from ahead, strike out of a fresh ambush, or be late in coming up so that he would have warning. He had scant hope of getting back before having to fight again.

There was not even a chance of night coming to his rescue. It was still some hours to darkness. They'd aim to have a settlement, long before that.

ON THE heights the air was rarified, cool. When out from among the trees, the wind nearly always blew. But down below, there

in the valley bottom from which they had climbed, where Queasy took its uneasy way, there would be a breathless hush, the air hot and humid, the flies sticky.

That was one sign of storm. Up here other signs were visible—clouds off in the northeast, beginning to pile like swarming bees. A lightning storm at these heights could be mean business.

Now the road was leading back down. The sensation was something like sliding down a corkscrew, since some of the grades had been built, not by engineering calculation, but by the simple expedient of digging whereever there was room for a road. Now the breeze from the heights was gone, and the heat made itself felt. Abruptly, they were among the trees again, the light dimming.

A rifle bullet whined like an angry fly, the sharper crash of the gun sounding an instant later. It came from behind, nearly half a mile. Here was a side valley, narrow and deep, canyon-like, and the gunman had come out of that. With him were at least half a dozen others, all trying to overtake the stage. Despite the long range, that first shot had been close.

This was about what Locke had figured on. The outlaw, not handicapped by the need to folow the road, knowing where it wound and that the stage must follow, had taken a short cut through the hills. They had hoped to dodge through that canyon and be on the road ahead of him, and it had been close.

There was scant liklihood of running into anyone who might help—not until he came much closer to town, and it would be settled long before. Off ahead again was the waterfall, the brawling creek not far from it, close beside where the road ran.

Several of the horsemen were doing their utmost to narrow the distance between, but a couple of them had chosen another method. They halted on a high point of ground, were depending on lead to bridge the distance between. The stage and six horses, even at this speed, made a good target, and they were shooting down slope.

The wisdom of their course was demonstrated as the off-leader squealed and floundered in the traces, badly hit. It fell, dragging the others to a ragged stop. Luck saved the stage from overturning, as it would have done a scant fifty feet sooner, where the pitch had been sharp.

But if this was luck, it was a mixed affair. They had stopped him, and would not be long in catching up. So confident were they of their full control of the situation that the gunmen had started forward again, and, like their companions, were hidden by bends and dips of the road. But that would not last long.

Locke jumped down, minded to cut loose the dead horse and go on with the remaining five. It was a hopeless race, of course. The outlaws would soon catch up, and the odds increased by the minute. But to try and stand them off here was still more unthinkable.

He hesitated, studying the troubled waters of Queasy, so conveniently at hand. Here the side-stream which came from the waterfall, recovered from its rude tumble, had just gathered itself together like a dog unexpectedly set back by a stronger adversary. Charging again, it spilled its unsullied tide into Queasy, so that for a short distance half the creek ran clear, the yellow refuse of the gold camp pushed back to the side, not yet able to reclaim the whole.

What he might do was take one of the horses and ride on, leaving the spoils to the victors. If the gold was left for them, they'd be willing to let him get away—for the present, at least.

But there was a stubborn streak in Locke, and here, whether they had intended it that way or not, the outlaws had given him a chance. His glance ranged back to the creek, even as he jerked open the lid of the boot and tugged at the box under it.

Not far out from the edge of the creek was a hidden boulder—a stone

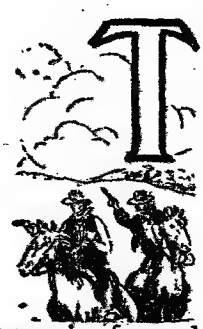
set solidly in the stream's path. A monster which had refused to budge through the years. The creek came up against it and shoved with a persistent annoyance, making a swirl which showed below in angry froth. Here, long years before, when the waters had been crystal-clear, Locke had pulled more than one big trout from behind the barrier of that boulder.

Carrying the box, he hurried toward it now. If weight was any indication, the full shipment of gold was here, all right. He staggered out into the stream, and the current struck with a rush against his legs, as though intent on upsetting him. Now the added weight helped him to keep his footing. He reached the boulder and lowered the box, behind its shelter. The gold inside would hold it in place, and water would do no harm to the contents.

Turning, Locke scrambled back out, cut the dead horse loose, and climbed back on the box. The outlaws must be close by now, though they were still hidden from sight. Queasy's ill-colored waters hid the box, and since the stage was going on, the riders would assume that the gold was still in it. Once they found out their mistake, they might figure that he had cached it when he cut the horse loose.

But by then, if he had a little luck first, darkness would be at hand, making any search of the creek impossible. By morning—if he was alive—he would be back after the box.

12



THE CREEK was left brawling by itself as the road wound and twisted, returning to the valley lands south of Highpoint. There were scattered clumps of trees here, cottonwood and pine and box-elder, but not enough for adequate shelter, and again the hard-riding outlaws were coming into sight behind. It was more difficult driving five horses, since the leader had a tendency to swing too far to the side.

The cayuses were nervous, strung to a high tension, running like wild antelope. Even so, the pursuers on horseback had an advantage, and now they were starting to use him as a target again.

A triumphant yell arose above the clatter of hoofs and wheels. Locke glanced back. They were gaining, strung out along the road, completely confident. Some of them rode masked. Others had not bothered even to hide their faces.

Locke shifted the reins to one hand and reached for one of his own guns. The odds were as long as the range was for a six-gun opposed to rifles—

Thunder let loose overhead with a crash which sent lightning streaming through, and as though it had torn a hole in the clouds, rain began to spill. The mist of it blanketed those behind, shut them away as the downpour really let loose. The valley was narrow here—not over a quarter of a mile wide, often less. At its edge, a solid heavy wall of water pushed its way above the valley rim and seemed to hang poised for a moment, then advanced, spilling. The horses regarded it in terror, trying to stop, to turn around.

Locke felt some of the nameless dismay which had taken possession of them. He had seen bad storms before, had been out in more than one, but none of them had been comparable to that gray impenetrable column of rain, still split and shaken by lightning which played like thunderbolts of the gods. There was about this storm a primeval force, descended out of the days when chaos ruled the earth.

All at once it reached and closed over them, wet and smothering, more than ever with an effect of solidity. It might have been a lake lifted and dropped. This was cloudburst, in the sense which old-timers used the term.

The horses stopped, uncertain, dazed; no longer even trying to turn, Above the marching beat of the storm another sound began—a mounting rumble to rival the thunder. The

death-agony of trees being uprooted or snapped off, of landslides tumbling down the slopes and spilling out across the valley as the torrent of water commenced its tearing rush, seeking escape.

Tons of water were falling all around, too fast for the thirsty ground to drink it in. Rivulets grew to streams, and in lengthening seconds the horses were splashing fetlock deep. There was no longer any sign of those who had pursued them. Locke tried to hold the team steady. It would be better to wait here, he decided, if they could last it out. An untimely dark had come with the storm, the hazards milling in that murk were beyond guessing.

What had been dry ground only minutes before was a lake, demon-haunted to judge by its wild turmoil. The lake was turning into a river as it gained movement. Locke saw that they must risk the hazard of blind travel and move also, that the only safety was on higher ground. But as the horses started splashing ahead, they snorted and tried desperately to turn, tangling themselves wildly in the traces. It was impossible to see as far as the leader, but now Locke glimpsed what they had sensed before it hit—a wall of water, plunging out of a side-coulee, stage high. A moment later it had engulfed them.

The horses were trying to swim, tangled and all but helpless. The stage teetered precariously, went over on its side like a drunken man trying owlishly to keep his balance. Debris was pouring along with the washing current—dirt and trees and rock being swept along relentlessly, boulders pushed like marbles.

LOCKE FOUND himself in the water, one more bit of helpless flotsam. Buffeted, half-drowned, he was swept up against a tree which still stood defiantly. He clutched at a branch which normally would have been well out of reach, was almost torn loose, but clung and climbed higher to an uneasy perch.

How long he perched there, while the tree swayed and threatened to give way, he had no way of telling. Time lost its meaning, while the storm beat relentlessly. Cold air had come with it, and he was chilled to the bone, growing so numb and dazed that he feared he would lose his hold and tumble.

After what seemed hours he noticed that the rain was slackening, then a rift in the clouds appeared. The sun lanced through, then, as though horrified at what it found, drew back; more rain came grayly, before slowing to a drizzle. Light came back like a slow dawn. It revealed water everywhere, and devastation.

Apparently the full brunt of the storm had centered here. The watershed of the surrounding hills had been poured at this valley, and getting rid of the surplus had taxed the resources of all outlets. The waste which had been moved into it showed more clearly—a mountain of it where the stage had first halted, on level ground. Mud and sand and trees and boulders, some of the latter as big as small houses, made up the mound. Not far from Locke's tree a stone man-high had come to rest. If it had hit the tree, it would have snapped like a match-stick.

Dully he surveyed the new-made hill. Above it, incongruous in such a setting, showed part of a wheel. That was all that remained of the stage. Probably the rest of the vehicle was buried somewhere there. But, seeing the vast pile, the size of those massy boulders, Locke knew that it would stay there.

Red Foley, of course, was buried with it. But it was a fitting grave for a man who had tooled a stage in country such as this.

There was no sign of the team. No way of telling whether they had broken loose and reached safety, or drowned in the flood.

Locke let go his hold and tried to climb and slide to the ground, and lost his hold and tumbled, so cold and stiff that he had almost lost control of his muscles. He picked himself up and splashed through the receding waters, turning toward the town. He moved mechanically, too tired to think. Night came down while he plodded, ushered in by a ragged panorama of wind-swept clouds, tinted to wild glory by a harried sun. He

had no eyes for any of it.

Exaustion, the chill of the storm, was in the marrow of his bones. He fell, and lay a while before rousing enough to get up and stagger ahead. He came to almost dry ground, where the storm had barely reached, but he was too beat out to notice the difference.

It was late when he finally reached the town. So late that the streets were mostly deserted, and now he moved mechanically, like an automaton. One idea was in his mind. To get to his office, to his bunk, and sleep. But effort had become mechanical, like the plodding of his feet.

He weaved drunkenly, collapsed. He was there, on his knees, trying to get back on his feet and not quite able to make it, when he became aware of a helping hand under his arm, a voice in his ears. Jinny's voice.

Locke tried to respond, but the fog was too dense around him by now. He walked, as his steps were guided, but without any sense of where he was going, or why. The oblivion that had been crowding close upon his heels for the last hours was everywhere now, hemming him in...

* * *

THE BEWILDERMENT of utter exaustion, caused largely by the long chill of the water, had been upon him like a smothering blanket when he went to sleep. There was bewilderment still when he awoke, a sense of unreality such as had not come to him in years. Locke looked around with growing incredulity. He sat up, conscious of stiffness in every protesting muscle, and looked around, and his wonder grew.

He was in a bed, between white sheets. A softer bed than he had been accustomed to, and there were lacy curtains at the window, a pink geranium in the windowsill. There was a dressing table and mirror, with a stool before it. And besides these incongruities there were articles distinctly foreign to his own rough experience, things unmistakably feminine. A comb and brush, a small hand mirror, a bottle of colored lotion.

"Good Lord, what's happened to e?" Locke wondered. *"Where am I?"* He sat up and swung his legs to the floor, and the accumlated aches and stiffness of the long exposure creaked through his muscles. He looked anxiously around for his clothes, and found no sign of them.

There was a small rug on the floor, and he rested his feet on it, moved gingerly to a curtain which walled away a corner of the room, and peered half-hopefully behind, then drew back, abashed. There were garments there, but certainly not his own nor the sort that he could wear.

His dismay was growing. But as he heard a light step in the room beyond, he jumped hastily back for the shelter of the bed clothes, blushing scarlet. Jinny's voice came from beyond the door.

"Are you awake in there, Orin?"

Relief drove out part of the dismay. He knew now where he was—this must be Jinny's house, her own room, her own bed. How he had gotten here was still past his understanding, but that it was Jinny rather than a total stranger was reassuring.

"I'm awake," he croaked, still not too sure whether he was, or if this would turn out to be a dream at the tag-end of nightmare. The door opened, and she came in, cheerfully smiling, his shirt and pants over her arm. Both had been dried and cleaned and neatly pressed, after the sodden immersion of the day before.

"Good morning, Orin," she greeted, as matter-of-factly as if this was an every-day sort of happening. "I hope you're feeling better."

He eyed her with astonishment, mingled with awe. "I'm fine, thanks," he agreed. "But how on earth did I get here, Jinny?"

"I brought you here," she explained. "I found you on the street last night, almost in a state of collapse. You had fallen, and were past going another step, it seemed. But it was only a little way here, and you did manage to walk with me helping you. But you were asleep as you walked, I think. I don't suppose you even remember it."

"I don't," he confessed, and shook his head. "The whole thing seems like a nightmare—"

"You were caught in the cloud-

burst, weren't you?" she nodded. "I've heard reports of how bad it was, a few miles from town. You must have almost drowned."

"It was bad enough," he agreed, and came back to the present. "But you shouldn't have brought me here, Jinny." Dismay surged in him. "It isn't right! What will people say? I'd never have come here if I'd known what I was about."

"I don't suppose you would," she agreed. "But I couldn't get you any farther, and besides, you needed taking care of. No one need say anything—or know about it. I'm sure no one saw you come here, in the dark. When you leave, you can step out with a package under your arm, as if you'd just dropped in to get something."

Her calm acceptance of the situation somewhat eased his worry. She studied him with calm appraisal. "I guess what you needed most was rest," she decided. "I expect you'll be rather stiff and sore for a few hours, but you're pretty strong—which is something to be thankful for. Here are your clothes. I did the best I could with them. Breakfast will be ready in a few minutes. And if you want to shave, I'll get Dad's old razor."

"Looks like I could stand a shave," he agreed, glimpsing himself in the mirror. She left the room, and he dressed, color flooding under his skin as he realized that she must have gotten him out of his soaked garments and into bed. But she had acted with good sense and resource, not afraid of conventions or inhibitions when greater things were at stake. And by so doing, she had probably saved his life.

He knew that he would never have reached his own room, without help. If he had fallen and spent the night, unobserved, lying out at this high altitude, cold as it became at such an hour and following a storm, soaked, exausted and unconscious—probably he would never have awakened.

Or if he had been discovered by any one of the several who followed King Steele, who made this town their headquarters—than he would have been in a worse fix. Jinny had realized all that. She had done the sensible thing, without hesitation or question.

THE CHEERFUL odor of hot cakes and coffee greeted him as he stepped into the next room, and Jinny turned from bending over the stove, her cheeks flushed with the heat.

"Right over there," she said, and indicated the razor, a mirror and bowl of hot water. Locke shaved, nor did she question him until they were seated at the table.

"You're feeling better?" she asked.

"I'm going to be fine, thanks to you," he agreed. "I can never thank you enough, Jinny."

"That's a rule that works both ways," she returned. "I think you probably know how it feels to be friendless, to feel as if you were all alone in the world, without a single one who mattered. It's pleasant to have a friend again—one whom you know is a friend."

Because he could understand that so well, he had no reply. But if these years had been bad for him, he saw now that they must have been even worse for her.

"Here are your guns," she said, once the meal was finished. "I've oiled and dried them, and I think they're in good working order. But I doubt if your cartridges will be dependable."

"I'll stop at the hardware and get fresh ones," he said, amazed anew at her attention to every small detail. But she realized that a gun meant a lot to a man in this town, and doubly so to him now. He had not told her of Red Foley, or the attack on the stage. Merely enough of being trapped in the flood for her to understand what had happened. But he knew that she had a good notion of what was happening in Highpoint, the savage cross-currents in existence.

He realized, quite suddenly, that there were a lot of things which he wanted to tell her—matters which had all at once become vital between the two of them. But this was scarcely the time or place for that. Particularly when he had such a job as

lay ahead, a task which could not be shirked or dodged, and whose outcome was not too certain.

"I'm not going to try and thank you, Jinny," he said. "Not now. But later—there's a lot I want to tell you."

"I'll be ready," she promised, and he knew that she understood, that she would be ready. The realization of it strengthened him.

"Don't forget those cartridges, Orin," she warned.

"I won't," he said, and stepped out into the sunshine. And was surprised to see that it was already past the middle of the forenoon.

13

FURY HAD shaken King Steele much as a terrier shakes a rat. A rage which, for a few minutes, had him in its complete control. The full story of what had him in its coming the afternoon, and the final certainty that the gold shipment was lost, had burst upon him like an incredible chapter out of a tale of Arabian Nights. That one man could so circumvent the many arrayed against him, was all but unthinkable.

Then, as he began to regain control of himself, Steele grew dangerous. He was directing his anger now, but it still prodded him like sharpened spurs. Nothing had worked out as he planned. But apparently two things which had happened were good. They might be turned to his own ends in such a manner that the whole episode, in the long run, would prove more profitable than otherwise.

"You say the sheriff's dead?" he demanded sharply, of one of the men who had brought the story. "Sure of that?"

Big Mule shook his head. It had been a nickname once, Big Mule, given him because of his physical size, coupled with a streak of stubborness to match that of any mule. It had clung to him when his real name had been conveniently forgotten.

"Ain't a trace of him to be found," he said. "And if you'd seen how that water come down there, the stuff it washed—stones as big as houses—the way it buried stage an' all—" he shook his head. "We found two o' the stage team, half a mile away, where they'd been washed—an' lodged on a bank, **six** feet higher'n the valley floor. Reckon he's dead enough."

"It sounds that way," Steele conceded cautiously. He drummed on his desk top with long, powerful fingers, staring at the darkened window. The happenings of the last several hours had made a big difference to him and to his plans. But since events had taken this turn, it might be sensible to crowd his luck a bit. One bold stroke now, and he would have the control which he had so long worked toward.

"This whole thing, of course," he added, "was an accident."

Something in his tone caused Big Mule to look more closely at him. "Yeah," he agreed. "Sure was. Some accident."

"You know where Cable is now?" Steele asked, and Big Mule studied him carefully. That question sounded irrevelant, as though he was changing the subject. But Big Mule knew his employer well enough to guess that it was all a part of one pattern.

"Yeah," he agreed. "He's down Red Creek way. To the roundup."

"And accidents sometimes happen at a roundup," Steele mused. "Fatal accidents."

Big Mule's lips grew tight, as slowly relaxed again.

"Yeah. Sometimes they do."

"I like 'em better—when they look like accidents," Steele added. "It ought to be a good night for ridin' south, Big."

Big Mule stood up and stretched mighty arms, flexing fingers that were like well-stuffed, uncooked sausages.

"Reckon I'll be moseyin'," he agreed, and went out.

* * *

Morning seemed to bring confirmation. Many men had ridden out for a look, where the full flood of the cloudburst had poured, to see the de-

vastation. The area of it was comparatively narrow—a circle of only a few miles of circumference. But inside that circle it had really spilled.

No one, reporting back, had brought any trace of Orin Locke. Nor had his bed at the sheriff's office been slept in. Locke, apparently, had found a grave there with the stage.

"And serves him right," Steele reflected, with a flash of his old anger. "How the devil did he figure out about that gold, when everybody else was fooled? There'd have been no hitch if he'd kept his nose out of it."

Not too much of the real happenings of the day before was known. Though a part of the truth had leaked out. The vigilante guards had ridden four hours, watching the lumber wagon, before someone made the discovery that their freight was just a dummy box, far too light in weight to contain the gold that it was supposed to hold. They had returned to town in fury, but certain other episodes of the day before could only be guessed at, since both Red Foley and the sheriff were missing. And those who had reported accurately to Steele were not saying anything in public.

"We'll let you rest in peace," Steele decided. "The great two-gun marshal, dying in performance of his duties." His lip curled. "And it's lucky for you that you're dead already, Locke," he reflected. "You were making too much of a nuisance of yourself."

He stepped out into the sunshine, and halted in staring amazement. A man was just emerging from the hardware store, his belt stuffed with cartridges which gleamed with newness. Sheriff Orin Locke.

BIG MULE knew when to move fast, and when to take his ease. He had lost no time in riding out of town to do King Steele's bidding, swinging off to the east and south, beyond the mountains, down through a placid foothill country, where Red Creek flowed. Though the community of that name was many miles on down. But once out of town, beyond the liklihood of being seen or reported by any chance rider, he made camp and slept the rest of the night.

"And once this job's done," he reflected. "I'm gonna have me a few drinks uh whiskey. Killin' is dry business."

It was nearing mid-forenoon when, unexpectedly, he encountered Grant Cable on the road. Riding north, and alone, even as Mule rode south.

Cable was, for the first time in his career, a prey to doubts and uncertainties. He had been sure of himself across the years; knowing what he wanted to do and how to get it. His was a clever mind, trained to follow a devious course and do it so adroitly that he had long filled a dual role and not even his daughter had suspected it. It had seemed to him, up to a few days ago, that he was far too clever to ever need to worry.

That talk with Reta had shocked him out of his complacency. And the following interview with Locke had jarred him to the depths. When you played such a game, you dealt, of necessity, with men of little scruple. And in dealing with any man, it was always well to remember that what the other fellow would do was unpredictable. A combination of causes might make him follow exactly the opposite of the course which he would normally be counted upon to take.

King Steele had done so, and the result was that the sheriff was no longer under their control. That had been only a first step. But what worried Cable now was not so much what might happen to himself, as the other, firer possibility which Locke had suggested—what would happen to Reta when she found out?

He saw that he had been living in a fool's paradise, a house of cards already collapsing of its own weight. He had welcomed the chance to go to Red Creek and the roundup, as a few days delay in facing the issue. But as soon as he had arrived at Red Creek, he had realized that it was not so simple.

This was something which had to be faced, fought through. And the sooner the better, with Reta at home and events moving as they were. After a nearly sleepless night, Cable had

saddled a horse and started north again. His mind was made up.

He'd side with the sheriff, since that was what Reta wanted. What would come of it was obscured by uncertainty, but for the first time in years his mind was at peace. This was what Reta would want him to do. He was even toying with the idea of making restitution to certain victims of past injustices, chief among them being Jinny Landers. But that, so far, was only an idea.

He recognized Big Mule just as the latter noticed him, but without much surprise. Big Mule was probably bringing some sort of a message from Steele. Cable pulled up. "Howdy, Big," he greeted.

Big Mule was not much surprised. He had seen already that Cable was alone, had guessed that he was returning, and recognized that this was a streak of luck. At the roundup, among dozens of men from many outfits, it might be difficult to contrive the proper sort of "accident" and at the same time assure that it was sufficiently final in its effect. Here, with just the two of them along a lonely road, it could be far simpler.

"Howdy, Grant," Mule returned affably, and pulled his own horse to a stop. "You headin' back a'ready?"

"Thought I would," Cable agreed. "You got some news?"

"Plenty," Mule nodded, and swung his own horse. "If you're headin' back, saves me going any farther."

That was only what Cable had expected, that he was bringing some word for him. It did not rouse his suspicion. "What is it?" he asked.

"Been a cloudburst, up that way, since you left," Big Mule said, and went on to recite the series of incidents as they were commonly known, giving also the inside details which he knew Cable would expect—how the four attackers had been beaten off by the sheriff, who had unexpectedly been with the stage. How Locke had killed three of them, the escape of the one outlaw and the subsequent pursuit of the stage, and how, just when they had been certain of success, the cloudburst had struck, forcing them to turn back and flee for their lives.

Cable listened, appalled. This was the way he had outlined it to Steele, but later he had told Steele, bluntly enough, that no attempt would be made on this particular gold shipment. Steele, he saw now, had taken matters into his own hands. The wanton killing of Red Foley, the subsequent disaster which had overtaken the sheriff, left him with mixed emotions.

But it seemed clear to him that Steele, having shown his hand, was now willing to play along with him again, since the sheriff whom he feared was out of the way. Why else should he send Big Mule with word of what had happened? And the death of Locke did alter the situation.

Big Mule observed him as he talked. Cable was intent on the story, completely unsuspicious. A plan was forming in Mule's mind as they rode. Steele wanted an accident. Here, on this little-traveled road, it could be easily contrived.

These were foothills, low as compared to the mountains which made up the heart of the Wild Buttes where Red Foley had tooled the stage. But fair-sized hills, for all that, climbing to the sun. Here were dug roads, narrow trails dug out of the side of the hill, barely wide enough at most places for one vehicle to travel, with not much room to spare. There were occasional turnouts where one wagon, meeting another, could wait for the other to pass.

Below and ahead was a steep, grassy slope, shelving sharply down for thirty feet to Red Creek. The Red was utterly placid today, undisturbed by the storm which had poured its waters into Queasy the day before. Big, bright-hued dragon flies sported just above the stream. A kingfisher gave his rattling cry from the opposite shore, perching upon the dead branch of a willow.

BIG MULE, as befitted his own size, rode a big horse—half as large again, as most cowboys preferred. He swung it now, with a sudden sharp touch of the spurs which he knew from long experience would set

it rearing and plunging. Then turned it so that its first wild lunge sent it crashing against the plodding horse which Grant Cable rode, there on the outward edge of the road, directly above the steep slope.

Belatedly, cayuse and rider alike awoke to their danger and tried to do something about it. Even then, for a moment, Cable did not guess that the act was deliberate. Not until he glimpsed the triumphant look on Big Mule's face did he begin to suspect, and by then it was too late.

Caught off-balance, the lighter cayuse was forced over the edge in one quick shove. It tried frantically to regain its feet, to stop its sliding plunge down the slope, the grass as slippery as oil. Ordinarily sure-footed as a mountain goat, it had no chance here. Its feet had been knocked out from under it by the shove, and there was no footing to be found.

Above, Big Mule watched closely, his hand hovering close to his holstered gun, alert to the possible need for it. A quick raking glance in both directions had already assured him that there was no one else around to see what was happening.

There would be no need for the gun. A thing like this was a matter of chance, or luck—good or bad, according to the way you looked at it. A horse might take such a tumble and land at the bottom none the worse. Or it might fall half that distance and break its neck in the doing.

This time, it was doing better than that. Big Mule saw it come to a quivering stop in the shallow edge of Red Creek. It kicked two of its four feet, spasmodically, and was still, lying on its back in the water, all four feet upraised, head twisted at a grotesque angle under it. The kingfisher, squawking raucously, flew away, the dragon-flies moved a little farther down stream and resumed their darting. Nothing else moved.

Grant Cable was equally still with the horse. He lay in the water, pinned down by the saddle-horn which bored into his chest, the whole weight of the dead cayuse upon it. And his face was in a pool which flowed completely above his wide distended eyes.

14

KING STEELE stopped, more shocked than he cared to admit. He had accepted the apparently established fact that Orin Locke was dead. Now, to see him in the flesh, plainly unharmed by his experiences of the day before, was unsettling.

Moreover, Locke's neatly pressed clothes gave no indication that he had been caught by the cloudburst. Here was a minor mystery in itself, but Steele dismissed that in the greater implications of the sheriff's return. The fact that he was here was enough. There was not the least doubt in Steele's mind that Locke knew of the part he had played in events, or the reaction which would follow. Only the method was in doubt, and it behooved him to move first, to forestall the star toter.

It had been a risky game, up to now. But from here on out it would be a contest with no holds barred, a fight to the death. Steele had no doubts.

He saw, with gratification, that a crowd was already beginning to collect, men as surprised as himself to see the sheriff alive. A crowd could be useful or dangerous, depending on how it was swayed. Nearly everyone here, including many of his own followers, were apt to be friendly to the sheriff if he gave them a chance to be. They were thinking of the two-gun marshal of tradition, the man who had handled the bank robbers so easily the other day. It was time to move fast.

Steele did. He came across to confront Locke, and others were coming up to listen. Steele's greeting sounded friendly enough. "So you're alive Locke! Everybody has been giving you up for lost, after that cloudburst."

Locke eyed him warily. He was still a little stiff and sore, though the night's rest and breakfast had done

much to restore him. But this morning, he knew, he'd be inclined to be slow with a gun—not much, but it took only a fraction to mean the difference between success and failure, life and death. And the promptness with which Steele had begun this, on sight, told him that the out-law boss was heading for a show-down of one sort or another.

"I hope everybody won't be disappointed," he retorted.

Steele's reply took the onlookers, at least, by surprise. "That depends," he said. "I won't mince words, Locke. There's too much at stake, for this whole community, just as there's been too much going on. Where did you spend the night?"

Locke returned the stare. He certainly wasn't going to answer that. There had been nothing wrong, nothing but genuine friendliness in what Jinny Landers had done, an act which had undoubtedly saved his life. But if he was to tell what had happened, no one would believe him or accept the true version of the story. He shrugged.

"I've been around," he said.

"So it seems," Steele agreed. "It might have been a damn sight better, Locke, if you'd died in that flood—died as the hero you've made folks think you were. Now we want some explanations. Seems you knew that that gold shipment was going out on the stage yesterday, though everybody else thought it was in a wagon. *And you're the only one who did know it was to go on the stage!* How did you know?"

The gathering crowd had become suddenly quiet, as they sensed that something out of the ordinary was about to happen.

"I had a hunch," Locke retored.

"A hunch!" Steele rolled his eyes. "It looks to me as if you had some inside information that nobody else knew—or was supposed to know. But I suppose you'll say you went along as sheriff to guard that gold. We'll believe you—if you tell us where it is now!"

Locke saw that Steele was scared, desperate. No need to doubt that. But in such a mood he was doubly dangerous. He played a risky game, but he knew that Locke would hesitate to denounce him, to tell what he knew about him. Such a story, without supporting evidence, would make the others believe that he was trying to lie to his way out of a bad situation. It would increase sympathy for Steele, and Steele knew it.

What could he say? That Steele and Grant Cable had put him in as sheriff because they were the leaders of the outlaws? No one would believe that. It would raise other questions even harder to answer.

"You seem to know what happened on the stage, and to it," Locke answered. "The gold was in it."

"It *was* in it," Steele agreed. "But I'm beginning to pack strong doubts that you left it in. Looks to me like we made a mistake, Locke, puttin' you in as sheriff. You had a reputation. But before you left this country, you had another, not so good. And the other Lockes have had a reputation that's not so good, either. Likewise, there's been a lot going on around here that needs plenty of explainin'."

He waited a moment, and as Locke made no reply, stepped forward.

"Cable's away for a few days. So I'll have to act for the committee again. Maybe I'm makin' a mistake but I'd rather be right now than sorry again, after what's happened. We put you in to serve as sheriff, temporarily. Since a change seems desirable, we can make that, too."

He reached across and unpinned the sheriff's star which Locke wore. Locke let him do it, his face set in grim lines. Maybe Steele did have the right. Maybe not. But a piece of tin wasn't going to make much difference in the final outcome here, one way or another.

What Steele was doing now was seeking to blacken him in the eyes of the townspeople, to tear him down where he had been built up. He was forced to accept it for the present. His story against Steele's, right now, would get him nowhere.

"For the present," Steele added deliberately. "I guess I'll have to wear this myself. I don't want the job, but there has to be a line drawn some-

where, and I propose to do it." He turned then, strode away without another word.

Locke watched him go, tight-lipped. This was build-up to show-down, and he had no one to blame but himself that it had come this way. The others watched him, silent, their half-voiced greetings dwindling in their throats. As he made no defence, gave no answer, he saw suspicion grow in their eyes. It was working as Steele had hoped, so far.

He had intended going to his office. But it was no longer his office. He turned instead, to the livery stable, and got his horse which had returned of its own accord the day before. Presently he rode out of town, toward the Three Sevens. He'd see how Ray was getting along, and after that he'd make other plans.

Reta met him at the door. A different Reta than he had know before, with tired lines under her eyes. but a determinedly cheerful smile on her face.

"I can't tell you how glad I am to see you, Orin," she said, using his first name as a matter of course. "I'd heard that you might be lost, after yesterday—and Ray has been asking for you. He didn't really believe you were killed—but I was afraid, just the same."

"I'm doing fine," Locke assured her, and was relieved that she did not notice the absence of his star, or, if so, did not attach any significance to its not being in sight. "How is Ray?"

"I don't know." Her voice was almost a whisper. "I try to think he's better—but I don't know. He's asleep, right now. But when he's conscious, he is so restless—and keeps asking for you, though I don't think he quite knows what he's doing. He seems so feverish, so—so awfully ill."

"At least, he's alive," Locke said reassuringly. That was considerable, considering the nature of his wound. It was surprising that Ray should think of or ask for him, even in delerium. He must be pretty sick.

Asleep, Ray looked white and wan. He had a good deal of fever, and Reta kept sponging his face with a cold wet cloth. He stirred restlessly but did not waken. Reta followed Locke out of the sick room again.

"I feel so—so helpless," she confessed. "Though if we can keep him quiet, I think he may get along better. But—I'm frightened, Orin. Not just on account of Ray—I don't know what's come over me. But I have a feeling as if something dreadful was about to happen."

That, Locke supposed, was a woman's intuition, a premonition, or a hunch. Call it what you would, he was afraid it might be based on substantial grounds. Steele would not be content with half-way measures now. He knew that he had gone too far to draw back or even to hesitate.

And he would be aware, as was Locke, that the crews of the Three Sevens and the Wagon Wheel were both a long day's ride to the south now, that they would be there for another week at least. Those were the only two crews of men who might seriously oppose him in anything that he would suggest.

The situation had moved far faster than Locke had anticipated, coming to a head with a rush. There had seemed little liklihood of such speed when he had agreed to let the crew go away as scheduled. Certainly Cable had not had any real inkling of trouble when he had gone there with his own men.

But now, if Steele chose to make some drastic move, he had everything on his side—even the cloak of the law!

Reta, looking out of the window, gave an exclamation. "Here comes Doctor Bannon!"

FLETCHER BANNON swung down from his horse and came up the walk, looking ageless as ever. Watching, Locke saw his eyes go to Locke's horse, and he seemed to be relieved. But there was little of the old puckish manner about him today.

"I hear that you're a man of mystery, Orin," he greeted. "But at least, you're alive. That's the big thing."

He went in to the sick room and remained there a short while, then came out again.

"Ray's doing as well as can be expected," he said. "Somewhat better than I had a right to think—though he's a long way from being out of the woods yet. So are we all, for that matter, I guess."

He hesitated, and it seemed to Locke that he was ill at ease. He strove for his old half-mocking humor, not to successfully.

"I don't know what it is, Orin, whether it's the prestige of you and the Cables trusting to my professional services again, or if it's just one of those streaks that come now and then, but I'm really being kept busy again, professionally! Having to make my round of calls. I'm so out of practice that it seems strange.

"Right now, I've got to go over on the west branch of Queasy to the Simpson farm. And I'll have to keep travelling right along, in a race with the stork. For the first time in years when I crave leisure, I find myself busy."

"You'd ought to like that Fletcher," Locke protested.

They were outside the house now, the door closed behind them. Bannon's pseudo joviality dropped from him like a dog shaking itself of water.

"Damn it, I don't" he snapped. "If it was anything but an emergency of that sort, I'd not go a step! I'd stay here with you. I can still use a gun pretty well."

"What do you mean?" Locke asked.

"Plenty." Bannon's voice was grim. "The main reason I rode this way instead of straight to the Simpsons was in the hope of finding you here. There's the devil to pay, Orin. You've stirred Steele up, got him scared—and when he's scared, he'll stop at nothing. He's letting it be known that the vigilantes found proof on the Wagon Wheel that Ray was one of the outlaws—and he's saying that you're a Locke as well, with fifty thousand in gold missing on account of you!"

Bannon's face was strained as he leaned down from the saddle. "He's gone to the judge—trust him to observe the form of the law while he flouts the substance—and obtained warrents for both you and Ray. And he'll be along any minute to serve 'em! I feel like a blasted coward, having to ride away and leave you now—for I'm convinced he means the death of both of you before the day is over!"

15

NOTHING COULD be said in contradiction of the doctor's appraisal. Locke figured it the same way. Steele was out to finish the Lockes, this time—Ray, because he stood first in Reta's affections, and Locke himself because it had come to a point where one and only one of them could survive.

Steele considered that he had the situation well in hand. He was doing this under the cloak of the law, striking when there were few to oppose. The fact that moving Ray would certainly kill him was being counted on. If Ray managed to survive rough handling, more would be added.

And the bitter point about it was that there was so little to do. All that they could do was wait for Steele to play his hand—and it looked as if he had all the aces to begin with. All, with the exception of the guns in Locke's holsters.

He turned, finding Reta by his side, her face strained and anxious. "What is it, Orin?" she asked. "What's happening?"

"Steele has warrants for Ray—and me," he explained. "He took my star today and is wearin' it himself. He'll likely be along pretty soon."

The little color that was in her face drained away. "But he can't come in the house without a search warrant," she whispered.

"Maybe that 'll delay him," Locke agreed. He did not add the obvious, that a few hours of delay would make little real difference. Or bother to point out that Steele, if he felt like it, was a man to brush aside technicalities, legal or otherwise. They both

knew that.

It was a strange situation. Little had he thought, when he returned to the Wild Buttes, that he would be risking his neck for the sake of Ray. The times were out of joint. But, like it or not, the Lockes were in this together.

There was nothing to do but wait. Reta, after a moment, went to confer with the two men who had remained on the ranch—both of them too old for the rigors of a round-up trip. Toby, the cook, had fried steaks and chopped hash for forty years. He was like the fence-rider, who also had been a good man in his day.

Both were willing, eager in this crisis, but their hands trembled as they lugged out almost forgotten guns and applied oil. Those weapons looked big and formidable when strapped in holsters, but they would not impress Steele or those who rode with him.

Reta saw them coming, an hour later—a dozen men, Steele at their head. He was making sure that he had force on his side, and plenty of it.

"You keep back out of sight," she said to Locke. "Let me talk to him. After all, I'm a woman—"

Locke placed little faith in that, and he knew that she felt the same way. But some of those who rode with Steele might look askance if he tried to get rough with a woman. Particularly when this was her own house. Locke agreed to keep out of sight while she tried. Reta waited, with the two old-timers lounging in the doorway beside her, doing their best to look cocky.

The posse halted, and Steele advanced, sweeping off his hat. With the assurance that had control, he was in a pleasant mood.

"Good afternoon, Reta," he gretted. "I'm rightdown sorry to come out here this way. But a job's a job, and when I'm given a warrant to serve, I'm the instrument of the law—to having any choice."

Reta's lip curled.

"Since when," she demanded, "did you become an instrument of the law? I thought Orin Locke was the sheriff?"

Steele eyed her closely, uncertain whether this was bluff on her part, or if she really did not know. He smiled deprecatingly.

"Locke was sheriff," he admitted. "But only on a temporary basis. When evidence turned up which seemed to indicate that he was not the man for the job—proof that he was one of the outlaws, in fact—there was nothing to do but make a change."

"I don't believe it," Reta flashed. "And in any case, you've no authority to make any changes until my father returns. He appointed Orin Locke in the first place. *You* can't remove him!"

Steele scowled impatiently. Particularly as he observed that some of the posse were following this argument closely, and impressed by it. Half of the men were his own henchmen, in his employ. He could count on them to go as far as he wished and no questions asked. But, anxious to appear to do all legally, he had chosen several men from the town, men with no axes to grind. He saw now that had been a mistake.

"The committee and the court have both concurred in the change," Steele said stiffy. "I have a disagreeable duty to perform, but no choice but to do it. I have two warrants here—one for the arrest of Orin Locke. One for the arrest of Ray Locke. Do you want to see them?"

"I'm not interested," Reta retorted. "I expect that Orin Locke will be able to take care of himself, wherever he happens to be, if you're unlucky enough to catch up with him. But as for Ray—surely you aren't in earnest? You know, of course, that he has been shot and is desperately ill. It would probably kill him to try and move him now. And it could certainly serve no useful purpose, since he can't get away in any case."

"I have my duty to perform," Steele snapped. "If Ray is here, he's a wanted outlaw—and it might be a lot easier and nicer for him if he didn't live to hang!"

"Then it's as I've long suspected, Mr. Steele—you haven't a spark of humanity in you!"

Steele colored uncomfortably, his

temper rising. "I'm not here to argue about what is right or wrong, but to do a job," he growled. "I've explained what it is. Will you stand aside?"

Reta fronted him, defiance in every line of her. "I will not!" she retorted. "And what are you going to to about it?"

Thought of Ray Locke, here in this house, being nursed by Reta, further frayed Steele's uncertain temper. "You're askin' for it," he warned her thickly. "If you don't get out of the way, there'll be trouble!"

"The same sort, I suppose, that there was at the Wagon Wheel?" Reta demanded. "You'll burn the house over our heads, to get us out—or kill us?"

SHE WAS watching closely as she made this charge, and saw the look which came into his eyes—a look which confirmed her earlier suspicions, assuring her that with this wild accusation she had scored a bull's-eye! She knew, with certainty now, that it had been Steele who had done that.

In the next instant she was cold with terror, having that certainty confirmed, seeing the look which came now. What would have happened, in the face of his mounting rage, she did not know. But at that point the cook chose to take a hand.

"Don't get techy, Steele," he warned. "You ain't got no right across this door—and there's a pair of guns here to stop you!"

Steele glanced at the two old rannys, and there was only contempt in his eyes for them. But Reta quickly took advantage of it.

"Toby's right," she said. "You can't come in here without a search-warrant! A mere warrant for arrest isn't enough."

Steele was having a hard time, fighting for control. Her barb about burning the Wagon Wheel rankled doubly, since he was not sure how much she knew. She had been there—always it seemed that she was underfoot at the wrong time, spoiling his plans. And Locke, he knew, had found those elks teeth. But there was an uneasy stirring in the ranks of the posse. One of them spoke up gruffly.

"She's right, Steele. Can't enter a house without a warrant. That's the law."

Steele cursed, under his breath. If he had had a posse made up entirely of his own men, he would have stopped for no technicalities. But as it was, acting as sheriff, making a play that he was only enforcing the law, his hands were tied.

"If that's the way you want it, we'll get a search-warrant," he growled. "Then we'll be back!"

He swung abruptly, walked back to his horse and climbed into the saddle. It would, after all, be better this way. What he did would be done legally. And he would leave half of this bunch behind when he got back to town, replacing them with men that he was sure of.

It would mean delay, but there was time enough. He was seething with rage. It had been his hope that this job could be done without too much fuss, that Reta would yield to the majesty of the law. Now he realized that he had made a double fool of himself, in wearing this star in the first place. There could be no reconciliation with Reta now. The only way that he would get Ray was by force, and the only way that he'd ever tame Reta was by showing her that he was master. The thought was pleasureable. There'd be a lot of satisfaction in that!

Reta stood in the doorway, ramrod straight, until the posse had disappeared from sight. Then she turned about, suddenly drooping.

"They'll be back," she said. "And nothing will stop them, next time!"

Locke, who had kept back out of sight, nodded soberly.

"Your father would be proud of you, Reta," he said. "But you're right. He'll be back."

"I wish Dad was here," she sighed. "But Steele knows he won't be back for a week—that's why he dares do this." Her eyes widened as she looked at him. "He'll go to any lengths—if he has to!"

Locke knew what she was thinking. That, if he used his gun and put up

a fight, with Reta and the two old-timers helping, they could make it hot for a posse, for a while—just hot enough that Steele, enraged, would resort in blind fury to the method which he had used before, burning the house over their heads.

When he came back next time he would have picked men who would go along with him in any measure. A fight, under those circumstances, would be hopeless.

Yet if they didn't—that would mean that Steele would take Ray, making sure that he never lived to reach the town.

Locke crossed to the window, looked out. There was one gain from Reta's defiance. The sun was setting, and it would be dark long before Steele could return. Which would suit the outlaw well enough, having a cloak of darkness for what he intended to do.

But it gave one possible chance. To move Ray again might be to kill him. But it might also save his life, which was forfeit otherwise. Since he would be moved in any case, it had best be done by himself, not by Steele and his cohorts.

"Hitch a team to the spring wagon," he instructed quietly. "Fill the bed with straw, and we'll move Ray out there. Then I'll take him to a new place. You'll have to stay here, Reta—you and the others. When Steele returns with his search-warrant, let him search as much as he pleases. The longer the better. When they fail to find him, there's nothing they can do, here."

Reta understood what was in his mind. The same nagging fear had been in her own, try as she would to fight it down. That, if they resisted, the house would be burned down around them. Steele had demonstrated already that he was capable of such action.

"I suppose it's the best chance," she agreed, dry-lipped. "But—but where can you take him?"

"I don't know," Locke confessed. "But anywhere is better than leaving him here. It's not only the best chance—it's the only one."

16

THEY WORKED swiftly, doing the necessary things. Toby and the fence rider harnessed a team and hitched them to the spring wagon, filling the box with straw. Locke bundled Ray in the blankets and fixed a stretcher out of a couple of planks, using this, they moved him with as little strain as possible.

Locke doubted if Ray knew what was happening. He was awake, but far from rational. In the grip of fever, his eyes were bright, his mind obviously not under control. Only desperate expediency could justify moving so sick a man.

"You'll let me know—as soon as possible?" Reta begged. Her heart was in her eyes as she looked down at Ray.

"Trust me," Locke replied gently. "And now, keep a stiff upper lip a little longer, Reta. I wish I could be here when Steele returns—but this way, you'd ought to get along fine. And my presence might make matters worse."

"I'll be all right," she agreed mechanically. "But what are you going to do?"

Locke was still wondering about that as he drove away. He swung off across a field, which would take him as far as possible from the road along which the posse would return. With darkness to help, and the delay before they discovered what had happened, there was not much danger of being found tonight. But with daylight, the enraged Steele would leave no stone unturned to find the Lockes and finish his vengeance.

And where could he go? Had Ray been in good health, it would be simple enough. The two of them would simply take to the wilderness of the Wild Buttes, down in that maze of mountains. Working together, they would be a formidable team.

But Ray was sick. He had to be

gotten to a place where he could rest undisturbed, where he could receive the best possible care. But did such a place exist? No cave in the hills would do. The fact that the sick man was Ray Locke complicated the problem.

Ray, over the years, had been a man of decreasing popularity in the community. He didn't have many friends. But to take him to the house of any of those few whom he did possess would be the worst possible move. Even if they would run the risk of giving him shelter, those were the places Steel would look first.

The house of an enemy was out of the question. And that left exactly no houses at all—

Locke, driving as carefully as possible in the gloom, stared hard at a star on the horizon ahead, without seeing it. Jinny! Could he do it—should he do it? He doubted if any one knew of his own visits there, so it was unlikely that Steel would think of the dressmaking shop as a possible hiding place. And Jinny, Locke knew, would gladly give Ray shelter and all possible help. She would do that for his sake!

His face burned at the thought. This was a poor way to repay her kindness to himself, to bring a fugitive sick man to be cared for. Far worse than that was the risk which he would subject her to if Steele so much as suspected where Ray was being hidden. Each hour of frustration would add to his fury.

Balanced against that was Ray's need, the fact that he could think of no other place. Jinny would say to do it, if she knew. She was that sort of person.

He swung the horses, heading for a little-used back road which would bring him finally to the town. It would be late when he got there, and quite dark. With any luck, he might get Ray into the house unseen.

It had been the better part of a decade since he had followed this back road, and apparently few had used it during those years. It was overgrown with brush, rutted and rocky. He used all possible care, but the jouncing wagon was no easy place to ride, even with the load of straw. A couple of times, when they crossed small streams, he stopped to bring Ray a drink of icy water and to bathe his face.

HIGHPOINT was quiet when finally they came to it. A dog barked in desultory fashion and slunk away, and somewhere a door slammed and the silence which followed that sound was more lonely than before. He tied the team not far from Jinny's house, which, like all its neighbors, was dark. Then he crossed and, knowing now where she would be sleeping, rapped softly on the window-pane.

He rapped again, hearing nothing. But knowing how frightened she might be of such a summons at such an hour, he spoke softly, face close up to the glass.

"It's me, Jinny—Orin!"

He heard a stir then, and an instant later the window was raised. He could see a white-clad figure, a dim face and hands. Jinny's voice was anxious.

"What is it, Orin?" she whispered.

"It's Ray," he said. "I've got him out here in a wagon. Steele came out to arrest him—it would have killed him if they'd taken him. I had to get him away first—"

She did not even wait for him to finish. "Of course," she breathed. "Bring him right in—at the back door. Or do you need help?"

"I'll manage," he said, filled with new admiration for her quick grasp of the situation, her readiness to help despite the risk. "I've got no right to ask this of you, Jinny—"

"What else is a friend for?" she demanded. "Bring him in, Orin."

That was unanswerable, but it was like Jinny. He went back to the wagon and lifted Ray as carefully as he could, still wrapped in the blankets. He seemed asleep again now, not stirring, but Locke knew grimly that it was probably closer to a coma. This night was doing him no good, save that it was removing him from the certainty of death to a fighting chance for survival.

No light showed, but Jinny held the door open as he came. She closed it again, and the room was so dark that he could see nothing. Her voice came. "I'll light a lamp—just one moment."

A match flared against the blackness, a tiny virulent speck of red which she drew across the wick of the coal-oil lamp. Then, as she adjusted the chimney and turned it up, soft light flooded the room, and he saw that she had carefully drawn the shades. She was still in her night dress, but had thrown a robe across it. Now she led the way to her own room again, to the bed where he had awakened only that morning.

Following her, Locke felt that this was a dream, from which he must soon awaken. So much had happened in so little time. It seemed far longer ago than morning that he had been here, and with the sense of comradeship which had grown up between Jinny and himself, it was as though there had been no seven years break in old friendship.

In the brief time at her disposal, Jinny had worked wonders. He saw that she had stripped away the sheets warm from her own slumber, had replaced them with clean fresh ones. He laid Ray on the bed, observing thankfully that the wound had not bled afresh. But there was little more than that in his condition to encourage.

Jinny was back, a cold wet cloth in her hand to bathe Ray's face. Then she looked up at him.

"You'd better get the wagon away, Orin," she said. "I'll look after him."

"You're an angel," Locke sighed. "I hated to bring him here, Jinny, but there was no other place."

"You did the right thing," she assured him. "No one will know."

That was voicing his own hope, but suddenly he saw how difficult it was going to be, to care for Ray and keep his hiding place a secret. He would need visits from Fletcher Bannon, and the doctor would be watched. Jinny would need help in caring for Ray, and he could not stay here with her. There were so many factors that he had failed to take into consideration.

"Do you mind if I bring Reta Cable to help you with him?" he asked. "She loves him—and then you wouldn't be alone..."

"That will be fine," Jinny agreed. "If you hurry, you should be able to get her back here before daylight."

"I'll hurry," Locke agreed, and repeated what he had said before. "You really are an angel."

She laughed, but without looking at him. "I lack more than wings, I'm afraid. Run along, now."

He let himself out of the house, looking back to observe that no light showed. The wagon wheels sounded loud in the silent street as he drove away, but this time not even a dog barked. He took the back road again, driving fast as soon as he was safely out of town. Relief was in him when finally he came in sight of the Three Sevens and saw that the dark bulk of the buildings sprawled peacefully as before.

THERE COULD be no doubt that Steele had returned, and he would have searched. Locke could picture his rage and disappointment upon failing to find his prey. Probably it had never occurred to him that so sick a man would be moved again, even before so dire a threat. Had he suspected that, he would not have delayed to obtain a search warrant.

There was the possibility, even the liklihood, that he might have left some one behind to keep an eye on the place. Locke drove carefully, stopping some distance away. Then, leaving the team and wagon, he scouted ahead on foot. No light showed anywhere, but he did not make the mistake of going to the house. Instead he made a feint of doing so, crossing open ground toward it, doubling back in the shadows and circling again.

He waited, breath in check, wondering if his hunch had been right, if his ruse might work. Then he saw a shadowy figure that moved stealthily, off by the barn, slipping toward the house as well. There was only the one, and Locke moved again.

Coming up behind, he could be sure that this was one of Steele's men, left to keep watch. There was something vaguely familiar about him, and Locke knew that he had seen him in town. He was right behind him, the cold snout of a six-gun jabbing the other man in the back, before the outlaw suspected that anything was amiss.

"Reach!" Locke hissed, and emphasized the command with a prod of the gun barrel, while with his other hand he helped himself to a gun. "Where are the rest of you?"

"T-they ain't no others," his captive assured him, with teeth which he could not quite control. "It—it's just me."

Locke believed him, since that made sense. He knocked at the door, and when footsteps sounded inside, called softly.

"It's me—Locke!"

Reta opened the door, fully dressed, and relief came into her face at sight of Locke. But it seemed to him that there were traces of tears on her face, deep trouble in her eyes. Which, under the circumstances, was not to be wondered at. He signed quickly to her for silence.

"Where's Toby?" he asked. "This fellow was hangin' around outside—watching for me, I figure."

"I'll get him," Reta said, and turned away. Presently she returned with Toby, hastily buttoning his shirt, his hair disarrayed from sleep. Locke guessed rightly that the two men had slept in the big house at Reta's request, to add to the security by all remaining in one place.

"Come along, you danged buzzard!" Toby adjured the captive. "I know just the place for you—and I'll sure enjoy puttin' you there!"

The fence-rider appeared then, and Locke instructed him to bring up the wagon, putting it where it had stood the evening before, and to care for the team. Then he turned to Reta.

"I took Ray to Jinny Landers' dressmaking shop in town," he explained.

"Jinny Landers'!" Reta echoed, and there was dismay in her voice.

"Yes," Locke agreed impatiently. "I don't think anyone saw us. It was the only place I could think of. If you'll get ready and we hurry, you can get in there before daylight, to help her look after him."

"I'll hurry," she agreed. "That was probably the best thing to do."

She did not stop to ask questions, knowing how fast the night was going. "I'll be ready in ten minutes," she added.

"Fine. I'll saddle a couple of horses," Locke said, and went out to do so.

He explained what he thought necessary to Toby, and presently, when Reta came out, they rode off together, again taking the back road.

"What happened?" he asked. "Steele came back?"

"Yes," Reta agreed. "He had a search-warrant, so of course we let them search. They were surprised, and he was furious, not to find a sign of Ray. He wanted to know where Ray was,"

For a moment her depression lifted, a smile touched the corners of her mouth.

"I acted as innocent as you please, and asked him what made him think Ray had been here any of the time. He said I'd admitted that Ray was here when they were out before. But of course I hadn't admitted any such thing. All I'd said then was that to try and move him would probably kill him. But I certainly hadn't said that he was here."

She laughed at the recollection, sobered quickly.

"It would have been funny—if it hadn't been so serious. But after they had searched, there was nothing they could do but go away again. It was clever of you to catch that spy he left."

It seemed to Locke that something else was troubling her, though it was probably, he decided, her normal apprehension for Ray. He strove to reassure her on that point, and darkness still held when they came to Highpoint. Though daylight was not far off. Leaving the horses in an alley, Locke led the way. He knocked softly at the door, and Jinny promptly opened it when he identified himself.

The two women looked at each other for a moment, Reta's face white, and Locke suspected that there was old antagonism here. Reta Cable had lived for years on the ranch which Jinny had had every reason to believe was her own. But after a moment, Jinny crossed to Reta with arms outstretched.

"You poor dear," she said. "You love him, don't you—and you've been

going through purgatory! But he's resting quietly now."

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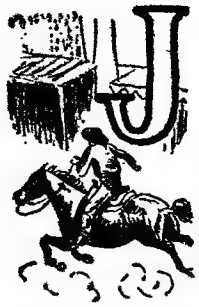

JINNY had breakfast ready for them, having known that he could not stay long, but certain that he would need food. "We're all hungry," she added. "What are you going to do now, Orin?"

"I aim to put a crimp in Steele's plans," Locke answered. "We'll see what turns up." He gave no details, and presently he slipped out of the house and back to the horses. It was still dark, but the day was building fast across the east. By the time he was out of town, objects were taking on shape and substance.

He was bone weary again. It had been another long, hard day, lasting through the night. He left the horses deep in a coulee bottom, and moved off a short distance to a grassy spot surrounded by brush, where the sun was beginning to strike. For three hours he slept, then, as he had planned to do, awoke refreshed.

His plan was simple. To return to Queasy creek and recover the gold which he had left there the other day. Then to take it in to town and tell his story. That would forcefully repudiate the tales which Steele had set afoot concerning him. It would put Steele on the defensive.

From there on, he had no illusions as to what would follow. It would be the same old story, with variations, that he had encountered in other towns with other men. Judge Colt would decide the matter. Gun law—which, at times, could be no law at all.

Here was where the cloudburst had struck, and the ground, a lake when he had last seen it, was still little better than a morass of mud. But he was still pretty well beyond the fringe of it again when he reached that part of the road where the horse had been killed, halting the stage. The horse, he observed was still there, and wolves or coyotes had feasted. Magpies clustered about it now.

The storm had spilled only its fringe here, but the full weight of the water dumped into Queasy up above had surged past this point. Signs of it were plentiful. Debris piled along the banks, changes in the creek channel. Now, however, the run-off was past, the creek back at its former level. The same swirl denoted the boulder still stubbornly resisted the pushing tide.

The water was deep, swift. Locke hesitated, then slung his cartridge belt around his neck and waded out. He had a few uneasy moments as he groped behind the boulder, unable to locate the box. It was heavy, well anchored by the weight of the gold, but such a flood as had passed might have rolled it like a pebble, if it caught the box right. If it was gone, then his hopes were gone with it.

He relaxed as he found it, half-buried by fresh sand. Presently he waded back to shore, carrying it with him.

It was far too heavy and clumsy to carry on horseback, in its present form, but he had foreseen that. He pried open the lid, and inside, soaked but still substantial, was sack after sack of gold—dust and nuggets, the various sacks tightly tied and marked with the name of the owner.

Transferred to a pair of saddle-bags, they could be carried comfortably on horseback. He had almost completed the shift when a voice from the fringing brush startled him.

"You can take yore choice, Locke—put up yore hands, or stop lead! It don't make much diff'rence to me, which! Don't reckon it does to the rest of the boys either, eh, Steele?"

Locke tensed, motionless. He had heard nor seen nothing, though the noise of Queasy as it brawled along covered all lesser sounds. Off by the dead horse, the magpies still flapped and bickered, giving no alarm. But a gun muzzle poked its ugly snout at him from the brush beside the road, and Steele's voice chimed in on a sardonic note.

"I'd sooner he'd try for one of those guns!"

Since that was what they wanted him to do, Locke was careful to make no move toward his guns. He'd kept as good a look-out as was possible, seeing no sign of anyone, but he knew now, bitterly, that he had been too optomistic. Apparently Steele had left a watcher at some high point back in the hills, on the theory that he might have cached the gold and return for it. Sighting him, he had signalled others, and they had had time to gather, sneaking up as he worked.

They stepped into sight now, boldly and no longer bothering to wear masks. The man who had spoken, holding the gun on him, was Big Mule. Besides the Mule and Steele, there were three others. They took his guns.

Steele was in a jovial mood. A lot of things had gone wrong, but this was a stroke of luck which promised to make up for all the rest.

"I rather thought you'd cached this stuff somewhere," he commented. "Nothing like applying the pressure to bring things to light."

Locke made no comment. There was a bitter taste in his mouth. He had no illusions. This was defeat, and Steele was not one to take any chances once this job was finished. He would be finished with it.

A few days before, that prospect would not have been too unpleasant. More than once, during the last years, Lock had gone out to meet danger with the knowledge that he might very likely be killed, and had gone almost eagerly. Death would settle a lot of things—finally, decisively. And perhaps in the best possible manner.

Dismay was in him now at the imminence of that final solution. What would happen to Jinny, and to Ray and Reta, if he was killed now? It was not pleasant to think about, knowing the ruthless nature of the man who stood before him. And now, for the first time in years, he had something to live for. Life had come to hold a rich promise which had been absent before.

STEELE was eying him sardonically, as if reading his thoughts. "You're quite a guy, Locke," he commented, and his tone was not unfriendly. "If you had a little sense of the right sort, we could get along. In fact, there's no need—now—for you to start pushing up the daisies. Use a bit of good sense, and you can ride out of this country. I've got control again, and this time I'm keeping it. You should be able to see that. Help me out a bit, and I'll give you your life for payment. Which is being more than generous, since I'll get what I want anyway."

Considered from his point of view, that was probably true. Though, on the other hand, there was the undisputed fact that Steele's word was no better than he chose to make it.

"All I want to know is what you did with that brother of your's," Steele went on. "I'll find him anyway, and you know that. Also, you know how he's treated you, how he'd answer such a proposition if it was put up to him. Better not be a fool."

Locke regarded him levelly, folding his arms across his chest. "I'm afraid I've been a fool too long to change now, Steele," he retorted.

"It's up to you," Steele shrugged. "But I'm not so blood-thirsty as you might suppose. I'd much rather do business on a sensible basis." He seated himelf on a flat stone beside the road, crossing his legs. "I might even throw in a couple of those pokes of nuggets. That would make your trip worth while."

He was hiding a desperate eagerness beneath a casual exterior, Locke saw. Which meant that he was not half so sure of himself as he tried to make out. Though what good that might do Locke was hard to tell, with five armed men watching him, while he was weaponless.

"Don't you think that you're going at this whole business backward?" Locke asked. Talk consumed time, and there was always a chance that something might turn up.

"How do you mean?" Steele demanded.

"What you want," Locke said blunty, "is Reta Cable. Your methods are making her hate you."

Steele flushed, half got to his feet, then sank back again. Big Mule guffawed suddenly, but was as quickly silent as Steele turned to look at him.

"My methods," Steele said coldly, "have the virtue of working, Locke. So long as they work, other things don't matter. But we're wasting time. I'll give you one more chance. Better take it. Watch!"

One of the magpies, full-fed, flapped lazily into the air. It was a long pistol shot, but Steel's hand darted to his holstered gun, lifted in a flash of sunlight on gunmetal, and the gun spat angrily. The magpie collapsed in mid-flight, tumbled in a heap of falling feathers. The others took in the air in alarm. It was an exhibition of shooting Locke could not have bettered.

"How about it?" Steele gritted.

"That's one of your methods," Locke returned. "Which doesn't work."

"In that case," Steele snapped. "Put up your hands—high! I mean it," he added, as Locke still faced him, arms folded. "I'm giving you the best of the deal this way—better take it."

Something in eyes and voice decided Locke. Steele was perfectly capable of killing an unarmed man in cold blood. Locke raised his arms, and as he did so, Steele's gun tilted again.

"You've had this coming a long time—and you're asking for it," Steele said coldly, and fired with the words. Two quick shots which blended almost into one. Locke felt the shock of the bullets, like red-hot irons driven through his flesh. Blood spurted redly, running down inside his shirt sleeves, dripping on down. His arms fell, sagging at his sides, each with a bullet through it. The pain lanced sharper, more sickeningly, so that he had a hard time to stand steady.

Steele was eying him sardonically as he punched the empty shells out of his gun and replaced them with fresh cartridges.

"I reckon I've dehorned you," he nodded. "For a two-gun man, that will be worse than killing—which is the reason I've done it that way. All right, boys, let's get going."

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LOCKE watched them ride away, taking the gold-filled saddle-bags with them. He kept on his feet, despite the pain in his arms, fighting to hold steady. Forty-five bullets had the pound of a heavy hammer blow. Even worse than the pain was the contempt of Steele, the knowledge that he had succeeded, as he put it, in dehorning the law man. A gunman with a bullet hole through each arm is helpless. Everything that he had tried to do, up to now, was turning to failure before his eyes. Red Foley had died, even while he was along to try and help him. The gold had been saved, only to be regained by Steele and his gang. Now they had put him out of the fight, and the rest of it could be handled pretty much at Steele's own leisure.

The mental agony of defeat was so sharp that it blunted the physical for a moment. Not for long. Then, as the receding hoofbeats died away, Locke knew what he was up against. Shot through both arms, between elbow and shoulder, left helpless for whatever might happen to him—cast aside as no longer of any importance.

The first wild gush of blood had subsided somewhat, which was pretty good proof that no arteries had been hit by those bullets. He wouldn't inevitably bleed to death in a matter of minutes, as would have happened if that had been the case. But there were four holes in him now—the steel-jacketed bullets had plowed cleanly through flesh and out again. And four holes, unless something was done, could drain away a lot of blood.

Plenty to dangerously weaken him. Perhaps to kill. Knowing that, the outlaws had callously gone off and left him to his fate. Steele probably

figured that he would die this way—a slower, more unpleasant death than if he had driven a bullet through head or heart, but just as certain. With two broken, bleeding arms, a man couldn't help himself, and he'd stand little enough chance of getting to someone else for help.

Locke moved his left arm a little, flinching with the pain, setting his teeth. He moved the other, fighting back a crimson haze that made him dizzy. But the suspicion that had come to his mind was confirmed. Whatever Steele had intended—and it was probably the worst—his bullets had missed the bones. *Neither arm was broken!*

Those were clean wounds, holes bored through flesh, which had already bled enough to cleanse themselves. Given good treatment and half a chance, they should heal without much difficulty, in due course. A matter of weeks. Locke's lip curled sardonically at the thought. Showdown was a matter of hours—if this was not already it, so far as he was concerned.

But the knowledge that Steele had failed to cripple him so badly as he had figured offered a ray of immediate hope. Aside from the searing pain of movement, he could use his arms if he had to—not much, for the pain was too great. But he had to use them enough to get a bandage of sorts around each one, to check that bleeding.

He was sweating, gray-faced, when the job was done. He'd used his bandana for one, another bandana which he carried for a handkerchief for the other. He had made no attempt to remove his shirt, but had done things the simplest way—a twist around the arm of the folded cloth, drawing it as tight as possible and tying it with teeth and fingers. Then a repeat job on the other arm.

Two or three times it had seemed impossible. Yet it was that or count himself finished, and he had driven protesting muscles to do his will. Now, arms hanging limp again, the bleeding was at least pretty well stopped, though they throbbed and shot pain deep into his body, a pain which weakened and sickened. But he'd done something which Steele had figured impossible.

They had left his horse, as a part of the whole contemptuous gesture, Locke crossed to it. The cayuse shied away nervously at the smell of blood, then steadied. It had been grazing with dropped reins. Getting into the saddle wouldn't be too bad, under ordinary circumstances. It was the chore of gathering those reins up and getting them where they belonged that made Locke blench again.

He solved it more easily than he had hoped—by getting both leathers in his teeth and holding them there. It was risky then, putting a foot into the stirrup, balancing and swinging. He was weak and nauseated, and a sudden swing away by the skittish cayuse at the wrong moment could send him tumbling under its hoofs. But it stood, and he managed, using one hand again to aid.

In the saddle he had a hard time for the first few minutes, as the cayuse broke into a run. If it had tried bucking, he'd have been finished. Even so, and though it was taking a course back toward Highpoint, he had to fight to keep his teeth on the reins, both of which were on one side of the horse's neck. To hold fast and to keep from losing his balance and tumbling.

Then, as the horse tired and slowed, he grasped the reins with his left hand, where they sagged almost beside it. The worst of the pain was past.

He'd be able to keep riding, with luck, back to town. With luck, he might get to Bannon and get his arms fixed. But that would help only himself. He would still be helpless to fight back against Steele, for he was under no illusions. It would take a fight, with guns. There was no other way. And no other man who stood a chance against the outlaws in that battle. Yet what chance did he have? Steele had moved to dehorn him, and he'd done the job just as he calculated on.

STEELE figured to play it smart. That meant taking the gold shipment back to town and returning it to the express company. It meant the

loss of that much booty, for which several men had already died, but that was a cheap price to pay for the benefits which would accrue.

Secretly, Steele had long aspired to wear the sheriff's star. He had known that it was out of the question to even consider such a thing, so long as he divided rule of the owlhoot with Grant Cable. But now that Cable was out of the way and the star in his possession, recovery of the gold shipment would vastly enhance his prestige. If he had done certain things, or might have to do others which were a bit shaky, people would be inclined to forget that if they had their gold back.

Moreover, it was necessary to complete his case against Locke. And in any event, it was no real loss—only a delay. The gold would still have to be shipped out, and could be recovered in due course.

Only Big Mule was inclined to kick about this, when Steele mentioned his plan. "Hell," he said shortly. "I been workin' for a cut of that. I figger I got my pay comin'. I want money to get me plenty whiskey and have a big drunk."

"You can have all the whiskey you want, without paying for it," Steele told him. "This other is business."

Big Mule regarded his boss, not entirely mollified. Thoughts were moving behind his rather pig-like eyes, but he craftily refrained from voicing them. Only the promise was important for the moment. Whiskey, and plenty of it, was what he had been craving for quite a while. Killing a man took something out of you. After such a chore, he needed plenty of liquor.

He was already going on toward Steele's big Wild Buttes Saloon while the others stopped in town, and Steele unloaded the bulging saddlebags.

"Here it is," he announced jovially to the gathering crowd. "We got it back by watchin' Locke. Like I figured, he'd cached it, and was aimin' to pick it up and make a get-away! Only it didn't work out for him."

"What happened?" someone asked.

"Not much," Steele shrugged. "He tried to put up a fight. He stopped a couple bullets. I don't figure he'll get far."

That seemed confirmation of what Steele had said before, proof which could not well be brushed aside. The fact of the gold, and that Steele had returned it, appeared to refute the suspicions which had been half-voiced against him.

"Everybody come and get their own nuggets," Steele invited. "Nobody loses."

"What about Ray Locke?" someone asked.

"The Lockes are both crooks, like we suspected," Steele retorted. "But I'll round Ray up, too—that's the next order of business. There's a good reward for anybody that finds where he's hiding," he added carelessly.

Big Mule was just emerging from the saloon. He was not a social man when he chose to get drunk. Big Mule liked to get his supply of liquor and go off by himself to consume it without interruption. Since he generally became ugly before his spree was ended, none who knew him made any objection to his doing so.

He halted now, a gunny sack with several clinking bottles in it, clutched in one big paw. For a moment his eyes narrowed cunningly at Steele's remark, and he chuckled to himself.

"Reckon I could open yore eyes—ef'n I was a mind to," he ruminated. "But when that's done, I aim to be there—and this drinkin' comes first. Longer you whew around and don't find Ray, better price you'll be willin' to pay *to* find him! Cheat me out of my share of the loot, will you?"

Muttering to himself, he crossed to his horse and climbed, not too steadily, into the saddle. Bystanders veered away, and he rode out in solitary grandeur. Something more than a mile from town he pulled off from the road and began the serious business of getting drunk.

With Big Mule, it was a business. For long intervals he would go without taking a drink, but about twice each year he felt the craving. Where an ordinary man would be drunk, under such conditions, with two or three drinks, Big Mule was again different. He had reached town late

the night before and started in on his thirst, consuming vast quantities, but his appetite had only been whetted when Steele had interrupted with a new job of following on Locke's trail.

Now, resuming, Big Mule drank his whiskey straight, emptying a bottle as though it had been a mild sort of soda pop. Steele had known what he was after when he invited him to get as many bottles as he wanted. Big Mule was on his third bottle, still showing few outward effects of it, when he heard a sound and glanced up to see Locke riding toward town.

LOCKE'S horse was walking, choosing its own gait, and the man in the saddle looked gray and drawn. But to Big Mule's wide-eyed amazement, he was riding, both arms bandaged. Mule's eyes still focused accurately enough that he could tell that those bandages had been contrived and tied by Locke, despite his handicap. Something like admiration stirred in the Mule, and he heaved himself to his feet.

"Here," he said, and advanced, holding out the half-emptied bottle of whiskey. "Hell and horned toads! You ought to be dead! But you need a drink!"

Locke eyed him, stirring to interest again. He had been sunk, for the last few miles, in a pain-filled apathy which took no account of the passage of time or distance. The shock had set in, and only a dogged resilence kept him in the saddle at all. The fingers of his left hand still grasped the reins with clamped grip, and the cayuse had stopped of his own accord.

"Blazes," Big Mule added, awed. "I reckon you're damn near's good a man as I am."

That was a simple tribute, the highest which Big Mule could pay. Seeing Locke's condition, he held the bottle for him, and Locke drank—choking at first, then with the color returning to his cheeks as the fiery liquor coursed in him. In his present state it was life-giving—more than enough, normally, to get him drunk. Now it merely combatted his exhaustion and helped to restore him to something approaching normal.

"Thanks," he choked, as Big Mule tossed the bottle away. "That helped."

"You needed it," Mule nodded. "I got plenty." He gestured toward the half-dozen bottles laid out in disarray beside where he had sprawled on the grass. "Only trouble is," he confided disgustedly. "They don't make good whiskey any more. Jus' dishwater."

His own throat still burning from the liquor, Locke shook his head in wonder. He felt immensely better for the moment, almost like himself again.

"Dishwater!" he repeated. "What sort of a man are you?"

"I ain't so bad as what folks think," Big Mule protested mournfully. "I don't do things to be mean—generally. I do jobs like the boss wants 'em done. Tha's all. Nothin' personal. Like when I killed Cable. Jus' a job. I didn't have nothin' 'gainst him. I I—kind of liked him, far's that goes."

He was drunk enough to have his tongue loosened, Locke saw, and marveled that it was not much more than that, at sight of the empty bottles scattered about. But he listened in horror to what Mule was revealing. Cable—killed!

"Reckon they'll have found him by this time," Big Mule added moodily. "Looksh jus' like an accident, though. Thash what's supposed to look like. But the' wan't nothin' pers'hanal about it."

He stooped mechanically, swept up a bottle in mighty paw and struggled with the cork and the foil which held it in place. By now, his huge fingers were becoming clumsy, and it resisted his efforts. Impatient, he took his gun barrel and knocked the neck off in one quick blow, tipped the bottle up and allowed the contents to drain down his throat like water.

"Dishwater," he repeated disgustedly. "No wonder Steele's rich—sellin' dishwater for whiskey. Damn cheatin' trick. Wants to find y'r brother Ray now—raisin' hell all over, lookin' for him. I could a told him how I saw you bring Reta there to that house of Mis' Landers early

this mornin'—might have, if he'd asked me!"

Big Mule was talking mostly to *himself now, staring unseeingly* at space. Locke listened, his faculties alert again, shocked at what Mule was saying.

"He c'n keep right on huntin'—till I'm good an' ready to tell him," Big Mule went on. "He won't find 'em—you're too damn smart for him. Too smart for anybody 'cept Big Mule. Steele, he wants Ray—and Reta. C'n have her too, f'r all I care. *I* like Jinny Landers. Reckon I'll look after her, when we go there. Ain't no other man t'compare with Big Mule, anyway."

His mumbling sank to an unintelligible monotone for a moment, came back strongly again.

"Yeah. Steele, he wants to find Ray—an' Reta. I'll tell him—when I've finished thish whiskey—dishwater! Take me till about supper time. Let him stew till then. They can't get away. I'll show him, then—and he better pay me good, thish time! I don't like killin' my friends—not 'less I get good pay for it!"

He swung back to find an unopened bottle, and Locke rode on and out of sight, unnoticed.

19

THAT BIG drink of whiskey had done a lot for Locke. Unused to it, the strong stimulant had been what he was most direly in need of. His arms still throbbed painfully, but he could think again and ride straight in the saddle.

The first thing that he had to do was get to Fletcher Bannon. First, to have his friend look after his wounds and consult with him, and then to send him to look after Ray.

So much might be managed, with a fair degree of skill and a sprinkling of luck. Beyond that he was not so sure. Showdown would come a little before sundown, according to what Big Mule had said, and Locke had no reason to doubt him. He knew something of Big Mule from years before, from stories he had heard of him. The big man was a strange contradiction. But his ability to do a job when he set out to, his mulish obstinacy in the face of every obstacle, had helped earn him his name. He'd report to Steele at about the time he had set.

And then, what? That was the clincher. Under ordinary circumstances, Locke would know what to do. He'd solved more than one situation, out of dire necessity, with the pair of sixes which hung at his hips. But Steele had forseen such a possibility, had dehorned him with a bullet through each arm. They had taken his guns—though others could be obtained. But what could a man in his condition do with guns—or without them?

The answer added up to futility. So too, did anything else which he could think of, in the crisis looming ahead. He needed his guns—and the ability to use them!

A startled light came into Locke's eyes. For a few moments he rode, so abstracted that he was no longer conscious of the painful throbbing, the sharper sting of pain as an arm was moved. He was crazy, of course—

Maybe crazy like a fox.

The excitement in him was heady as the whiskey had been, a stimulant to keep him going as the effect of the other wore off. Highpoint was ahead, now, comparatively quiet at this hour, with most of the men working in the mines. He circled, choosing a back approach to reach the cabin which had been home to Fletcher Bannon for many years, thankful that Bannon had preferred a remote and lonely spot.

Hope was desperate in him that he would find Bannon at home. To seek him through the town would spell disaster. But luck was with him. Bannon was home. He stared in amazement as Locke stepped quickly through the door and inside, almost stumbling now that he was on his feet again.

"Great day in the afternoon!" Bannon exclaimed. "What's happened to you, man?"

"Steele put a bullet through each of my arms," Locke said simply. "He figured to dehorn me. What's happened in town?"

Bannon's lips tightened, as he reached to stir the fire in the stove and make sure of hot water in the kettle.

"It's close to a reign of terror," he growled. "Steele is on a hunt for Ray. He'd turned the country upside down without finding him, but everybody knows he'll kill him on sight. Here, let me get at those arms."

Carefully he began cutting away the coat and blood-soaked shirt, pausing for a moment to survey the oddly contrived bandages.

"Who fixed these?" he demanded.

"I did."

"You—" Bannon stared, went to work again. "The devil!"

"Fortunately, his bullets missed the bones," Locke pursued, still tense with the bigness of the idea which had come to him. "Listen, Fletcher. I met Big Mule, back a few miles. He had enough whiskey bottles to get an army drunk, and was just drunk enough to be feeling good, to have a loose tongue. He gave me a drink—which was all that kept me going."

"One score for the devil," Bannon commented grimly.

"He told me two things," Locke went on, as Bannon started to cleanse the wounds, working with the gentle touch of a woman. "For one thing, he killed Grant Cable yesterday, in such a way as to make it look like an accident!"

"Cable, eh?" The doctor nodded without surprise. "They just brought his body in to town an hour ago. Said his horse had fallen on him."

"Big Mule said he killed him. And he intended to finish his whiskey, which would take till about supper time. After that, he's planning to tell Steele what he wants to know—where to find Ray."

"How does he know?"

"It seems he saw me carry him into Jinny Landers' home early this morning."

"Jinny's house?" Bannon. whistled. "So that's where he is!"

"That's it. And Reta Cable is there with them. You know what that means, Fletcher?"

Again the doctor's nod was grim.

"It means the devil to pay—*if* he's allowed to see Steele," he agreed. "I'll put your arms in traction splints for a few days to keep them from being used. It will be uncomfortable, but the best and quickest way. As soon as I get them fixed, I'll ride out and shoot the Mule."

Locke stopped him with a shake of his head. "No, Fletcher," he said. "Neither the one nor the other."

Something in his tones made his friend regard him seriously.

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "Why not? He's got to be stopped—and tell me any other way?"

"There isn't any other way," Locke retorted. "But it would be suicide to try it. Big Mule's hardly human, when it comes to whiskey. He'll keep on drinking, but he won't be really drunk. If you tried it—and I know that you're reasonably good with a gun—he'd kill you. He's never too drunk to outshoot most men."

Bannon shook his head stubbornly. "I can do a good job of trying," he growled.

"Not good enough, I tell you. And we need you alive."

"I could sneak up and shoot him before he knew I was there."

AGAIN LOCKE shook his head. He was so filled with excitement, Bannon observed professionally, that he scarcely seemed aware of his wounds.

"You know you couldn't do that, Fletcher. You're no murderer. You'd have to give him warning—a fair break. And that would ruin it."

"Then suggest something better," Bannon protested. "Good Lord, Orin. Don't you know what will happen, when Steele gets there—not alone to Ray, but to those girls as well? He's a mad dog let loose. And he's wanted Reta for a long while."

"I know," Locke agreed. "We'll forget Big Mule and concentrate on Steele when the time comes. As soon as you get me fixed up, can you go there, in some sort of a disguise so

that nobody will guess it's you, and look after Ray? He'll need your attention. Going to the shop in the guise of a customer should work."

"I can manage that, and nobody will guess that it's the town bum," Bannon grunted. "But what good will it do to look at him if he's to die tonight?"

"Not the splints, for my arms," Locke protested. "Just bandage them up again, Fletcher—so they won't start to bleed again, but so they're not bulky or clumsy."

The doctor paused to stare hard at him. "You sound as if you aimed to use your guns again?" he remarked, half in derision.

"I do," Locke said calmly.

"You—what did you say?"

"With your help," Locke added. "Or rather, your guns, since they took mine. Listen, Fletcher. There are no bones broken, you'll observe—nothing worse than a couple of holes, one in each arm. I knew that, when I managed to use them a little, though it hurt like the devil. But fundamentally there's nothing else wrong with them."

"Nothing in the world," Bannon agreed. "Except a bullet hole through each arm. And you tell *me* that I'm too slow to match lead with a killer!"

"So would I be—now. It would hurt so that I couldn't even lift a gun. But if you hypnotize me, Fletcher, *so that I won't feel the pain*— I'd ought to be able to use my guns tonight!"

Bannon stared at him in silence for a long moment, clearly startled by the notion. Yet Locke knew that it was not a new thought to Bannon. He had believed in the use of hypnosis in medical practice, had used it in the past, even though it had drawn down bitter criticism upon his head.

"If you hypnotize me now, I'll not feel the pain," Locke went on. "I can eat a meal and get several hours of sleep while you look after Ray and keep watch. By the time Steele starts after him, I should be in pretty good shape again. And not being bothered by pain—I'll stop him, Fletcher. It's the only way."

Slowly, a grin spread over the doctor's puckish face.

"I haven't had a drink of beer for two days," he said. "And I'm so sober that at first I didn't trust my ears. *But I believe you've hit it. It's radical*—but it will work! Whether your arms will have sufficient speed left in them, with a hole in each one, even though you don't feel the pain—I can't say. It's a risk. But if you can deal with Steele, then the girls and myself can tell what we know, and get a hearing. After all, with Steele out of the way, there'll be nothing to worry about. But Steele is something else again. Even at your best, do you know what you'll be up against? Steele is one of the best gunmen who ever brought hell to the high country."

"Name a better way, under the circumstances," Locke challenged.

"I can't," Bannon conceded. "This is a long chance—but I think it's the only one. And it will take Steele completely off guard, that's one merit. All right. Don't try to resist me. I'm going to do my part."

* * *

THE PAIN, of course, was there. That was an abstruse fact, like the question of the existence of sound where there would be no ears to hear it. But the flesh no longer felt the pain. Being ignorant of its existence, it acted as if there was no pain.

That was a layman's explaination, rather than a scientific one, but it suited Locke well enough. It was startling, little short of a miracle, Bannon reflected, even though he understood it all well enough. In a matter of minutes Locke had become a new man. He saw the bandages on his arms, but gave them no further thought. In his present state, Bannon knew that he had forgotten them or what they stood for, just as he had forgotten his wounds.

Ordinarily, this was not what Bannon, as a doctor, would approve. The treatment, yes, but not the procedure following it. To use his arms as they must be used, as though there was nothing wrong with them. That might not particularly harm them, but by no stretch of the imagination could it be called an aid to healing at the present stage. But it was a drastic remedy for a drastic situation.

Locke was sleeping when Bannon

left him a little later. During his student days in France he had done some acting on the side. Now he was so adroitly disguised that passers-by on the street stared at him, wondering who he might be, with no guess that this was the beer-guzzling medico. He walked with a curious exhilaration, having no fears for Locke. He had locked the door at his house, and no one, if they thought to look there, could break in without first arousing Locke. And a pair of six-shooters were handy to his side.

Locke was still sleeping when the doctor returned from his call, carrying a small package under his arm which he had ostensibly purchased at the dress-making shop. The afternoon passed in a lazy somnolence, the sun warm overhead, with nothing to disturb the peace. Whatever hunting Steele was doing, it appeared to be elsewhere.

It was about supper time, something more than an hour short of sunset on this long summer evening, when the doctor awakened Locke.

"They're coming," Bannon said quietly. "Steele and Big Mule, and half a dozen more of his crew. Looks like they're headin' toward the dress-makin' shop!"

Locke glanced out the window, alertly. With a fresh clean shirt on now, over his bandaged arms, nothing showed. He was still under the influence of the hypnosis, as Bannon had planned, and he seemed to have forgotten that there had ever been anything wrong with his arms as he slipped the guns into their holsters. The sleep, together with a meal and the treatment, had made a new man of him. Steele, the doctor guessed grimly, was in for a surprise.

"Ray's considerably better, this afternoon," Bannon added. "He's made the turn, I think."

The posse were on foot, going purposefully, but no hurrying. Having kept a careful watch, Bannon had made sure that they still had some distance to go. Locke could take another course and arrive there ahead of them.

"I'll be along to back you up," Bannon added, and gave his patient a few last words of instructions, to make sure that he would play his part as scheduled. Though there was little fear of that. The fears which caught claw-like at the doctor's heart were of a different nature. Locke might no longer even be aware of his disability, but would injured arms respond as fast when it came to a show of speed? Life and death hinged on the answer, and that was beyond the power of any medico to calculate.

Locke moved swiftly, choosing a course which kept him out of sight of those others heading for the same destination. He reached the shop and circled to the rear, to the kitchen door, rightly judging that Steele would also head there, though leaving some one to watch the front of the shop. As he reached the door, the others came in sight less than fifty feet away.

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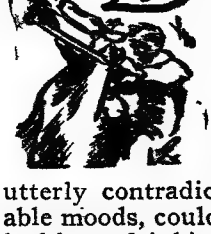

BIG MULE had consumed his liquor as scheduled, and he still showed few outward effects of it. To him, as he named it, it was dishwater. Only from the fact that it loosened his tongue and made him a creature of utterly contradictory and unpredictable moods, could one be sure that he had been drinking.

He walked beside Steele now, both of them silent. Big Mule because he had suddenly lost his volubility, Steele because he was tense and eager. He had made sure during the day that the town was completely under his domination. Men knew whom he was hunting for, and what would happen to a man in Ray Locke's condition when arrested. But word of the death of Grant Cable had spread, of the shooting and discrediting of Orin Locke. This one final gesture would wipe out all effective opposition, and men, though they might hate him, would fear him more.

Steele halted abruptly, jerked out

of pleasant contemplation by sight of the lounging figure there before the doorway. He blinked for a moment and stared again, more shocked and startled than he had been by anything in a long time.

But there was no doubt about it. That was Orin Locke waiting there, arms folded across his chest, rather than hanging at his sides—arms which showed no blood nor sign of the shattering forty-five slugs which he, Steele, had sent crashing through them only a few hours before. He did not seem like a sick man. And the look on his face was a warning in itself.

"Did you want somethin', Steele?" he asked softly, and took a slow step forward.

Steele stared, still not quite believing the evidence of his eyes. He was badly rattled, and his first question proclaimed it. "What the devil are *you* doing here?" he demanded.

The answer was equally chilling. "I'm here to kill you, Steele."

The others were watching warily, Big Mule with renewed interest. Suddenly he guffawed. "That whiskey musta done you some good, Locke," he said. "Gran' ol' dishwater!"

Steele was beginning to get a grip on himself. He was at a loss to understand what had happened. It was clear to him that Locke was still a dangerous man, a factor to be reckoned with. But what did it matter? He knew that appearances were deceptive, that Locke, if it came to a show-down, could do no more than bluff. The reflection was reassuring.

Likewise, he had plenty of men to back him up, men who, like himself, would stop at nothing. In addition, a considerable number of people were watching, keeping at a discreet distance, but avid with curiousity. This had to be gone through with. His prestige depended on it. "I don't want to have to kill you, Locke," he said shortly. "I tried to make that plain before. But I'm here in my official capacity. So stand to one side."

"I don't like killing," Locke returned simply. "If there was any other way, I'd take that. But it's me or you, Steele—and you're here to murder a sick and helpless man. After I've settled with you, I'll tell the folks here of the part you've been *playin'*—how you and Cable appointed me sheriff—"

Steele clutched at that straw, eagerly. "We appointed you," he interrupted. "And when we found you were a crook, I kicked you out of the job!"

"When you found I wouldn't do your dirty work, you mean," Locke corrected. "You've played a smooth game, Steele, up to and includin' havin' Cable murdered, because you were afraid of him. But you're the leader of all the outlaws in this section of country, and I can prove—"

He got no farther. Steele had listened in mounting rage and alarm, curiously reluctant to come to grips with this man who by rights should be dead, or nearly so. It seemed to him that here was something bigger than a man, something which it would be folly to battle against. Yet he must act, or Locke would reveal the truth in such a way that everyone would know it past doubting.

It was a task which was his to do, Steele realized. His men seemed to feel some of the same dread which was in himself, knowing what had happened to Locke. Several of them had been there, to see him standing, shattered and helpless, blood pouring from his wounds. They wanted no more truck with such a fellow. This was Steele's job.

Steele tried again to reassure himself, to remember what had happened to Locke and get a grip on the fact that this was bluff—pure bluff, which could be nothing more. He flung himself to one side, half-turning, his hand stabbing for his gun. Knowing that he was a bit off balance, nerves ragged, yet still fast. Let even any whole man match lead with him!

He was in the middle of his draw, the gun clear of leather but only that, when a bullet drove him back, hitting him in the chest with battering power. Locke was standing, arms no longer folded, but with a gun in each hand, one of them smoking. As Steele faltered and tried to lift his own gun higher, a second slug pounded at him, and he half-turned and fell, and seemed to grovel in the dust. Above

the echo of gun-fire, Locke's voice came, sharp and edgy.

"Reach, the rest of you! Fletcher, lift their hardware," he added, as the doctor appeared, and watched in silence while his order was carried out. Even Big Mule seemed awed and offered no resistance.

"And now, git!" Locke snapped. "I'm speakin' as the real sheriff! If you're in town tomorrow, or ever again, it'll be the worse for you!"

He became aware, as from a timeless distance, that Bannon was beside him, a pile of guns at his feet, the doctor's arm thrown across his shoulder.

"It's a clean-up, Orin," the doctor chuckled. "Complete and finished, right now, if you ask me! Folks don't need any explanations—they know plenty! And after the job you've done—hanged if I won't have to revise my whole opinion of my career! You're one patient that I'm so proud of I could blubber!"

Then, being first and last a doctor, he looked keenly at his friend, knowing the unguessed weariness and strain, and turned to the door which was open behind them.

"Let's go inside," he said. "I think there are those here who want to see you!"

* * *

THAT WAS no overstatement. Jinny was holding the door open, waiting for him, and there was welcome in her eyes—that and a mirroring of other emotions which caused them to swim with unshed tears.

Locke found himself alone with her in the kitchen, Bannon having gone on in to the sick room. And at what he saw in Jinny's eyes, he knew all at once a deep content, a sense of homecoming which had been long absent. Now there was no obstacle in the way to coming home.

"Jinny!" he said. And reached out hungry arms. Jinny came to them without hesitation.

"Oh, Orin," she murmured, after a moment. "Your poor arms! But you seem to be able to use them all right!"

He was a little puzzled, but it did not matter. The things which did matter were clear enough, and Fletcher Bannon would take care of the rest. Presently, with a discreet cough, the door appeared in the doorway again.

"If you can spare a little time," he suggested. "There are others who would like to see you. And after that, you're going back to my place and to bed. I'm more than pleased, as a doctor with a theory which has been so well verified, but as a plodding medico, I know that flesh should not be subjected to too great a strain. Here he is, Ray."

Ray Locke was conscious, and, for the first time since his own wounding, he seemed in reasonably good condition. His fever had abated considerably, there was a rational look in his eyes. To Locke's amazement, it was almost pleading as he came over to the bed.

"He wasn't set back by last night's jaunt, luckily," Bannon said softly. "And he wants to talk to you, Orin. But not for long. He's a sick man still."

"Orin," Ray said, his voice just above a whisper. "Reta's told me—what you did. I want to beg your pardon, Orin—to ask your forgiveness. I've been—such a heel—"

"Of course it's all right, Ray," Locke retorted. "Don't let that worry you. Just get well—for my sake, and Reta's."

"I will," Ray promised. And his look at Reta sent the color flooding into cheeks which, Locke noticed now, had been more than usually pale. Presently they were back in the other room. Reta seemed as mystified as she was pleased.

"He's so changed, since he grew normal this afternoon, Doctor," she said. "I—I've always liked him. But he's so much more—well, the sort of man that I've wished he was—the sort that it seemed to me he might be." She looked around, confused in her own mind, groping for an explanation, and her eyes fixed on Locke. "So much more like Orin," she finished.

Bannon nodded placidly. "You'll find him that way from now on," he agreed. "It was as I'd long suspected, observing him, remembering how different he had been as a boy. You thought it was bad Levering blood

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The Dead Laugh Last

by MIKE BIENSTOCK

and Rocky Gaines couldn't get the last laugh in any other way than by dying!

The rider lay forward on the horse, his breath coming shallow and fast, his eyes glazed, skin stretched taut over his cheekbones. Blood dripped from the ugly hole in his side; his life ebbed with each spurt of gore.

With a supreme effort he pushed himself erect in the saddle and twisted around. The riders back on the rough trail danced in his blurred vision. His eyes narrowed as he gauged their distance. Suddenly he swung forward and with a low, animal snarl, dug his heels into the side of his straining horse. The game little mount leaped forward while the dying man's thoughts whirled back to the streets of Mesa City.

POWDERY dust billowed up and caked on his lean, drawn face as the horse picked its way down the main street. Rocky Gaines wiped sweat from his tan forehead with a stained shirtsleeve and eased his mount toward a low, unpainted clapboard building bearing the legend "Golden Eagle Saloon."

He swung long legs from the saddle and twisted the reins around the rail. Slowly, almost deliberately, he stepped up the creaking wooden stairs and halted. Wearily he squinted up and down the sun-baked street. He blinked dust out of his red-rimmed, steel-grey eyes.

The same old cow town—the thought struck him with a dull impact. Just like the scores of others he'd seen in his drifting. Dusty streets, false-fronted buildings, a few idlers lounging in the shade of the overhangs. An old Mexican leaning against the rail across the street. And the sun a brazen ball of fire, beating down incessantly.

Rocky's thin lips twisted in a mirthless grin. It seemed to him as if he'd been passing through the same flyblown town for most of his life. The rutted dirt streets, faded buildings, the shrill babbling of a couple of kids in the distance seemed a part of him.

It was no different from that other one, five years before...Gawd! was it only five years?...when he lit out in a hurry after a gunfight. Maybe it *was* his bullet in the loudmouthed traildriver. He hadn't waited to find out. They weren't in a pretty mood, those cowpokes, and he had no stomach to decorate the end of a rope.

He was eighteen when he had started out to see what Texas was like. He found out in a hurry. And he had kept traveling ever since. It seemed as if trouble dogged his footsteps wherever he went. It followed like a faithful pup. In one town it would take the form of a woman, in the next, cards. But always it was there. He wondered, idly, what it would be like to settle in one place for a while.

The batwings behind him crashed open with a loud clatter. A short, chunky individual in a loud shirt and expensive Stetson staggered from the saloon, his beady eyes flicking briefly over Rocky as he lurched past. With a faint grin the slim drifter turned and strode toward the cool-looking interior.

A dull thud stopped him dead. He spun around. The man lay in the street, apparently out cold. Tripped on the steps, Rocky thought as he started toward him. He stopped short in surprise. The old Mexican was shuffling hurriedly across the street, then bent over the prostrate figure.

"*Senor* Jason," the leathery-skinned old man rattled, jerking at

"Get to your feet before I kick you up!"

the limp arm. "Are you all right, *senor?*"

Jason lifted his face from the dirt, shook his head, puzzled. He looked up at the man, then rolled over like a snarling praire wolf. He glared at the Mexican, his mouth twisting savagely.

"You d a m n' old greaser," he snarled. "Keep your filthy hands off me."

Eyes venomous as a rattler, he slithered erect, snaking out his six-gun. The old man shrank in terror. He scuttled back, arms upraised over his blanching face. Jason leaped, his features distorted in hatred, gun whipping. The Mexican screamed like a stuck pig when the barrel cracked into his head.

"*Senor* Jason," he whimpered, blood streaming down his face, dripping

from his chin to muddy the dirt. "I only follow your father's orders."

"To hell with my father. I'm old enough to wipe my own nose without a filthy Mex doing it for me," he growled, raising his gun once more. "I told you to stay away from me."

A low rumble grated from Rocky's throat. He remembered a dog he owned when he was ten. And he remembered his father beating it to death in a drunken rage. He felt the old hatred in his soul rising like a fury. The Mexican slumped to his knees, face buried in his wrinkled hands.

Blind anger tightened across his chest. The killing urge surged through him as it had that other time. He exploded into berserk action.

The short man spun around as if warned by some sixth sense. His pig eyes blinked at the sight of Rocky's swift charge, his heavy mouth sagged open.

By almost reflex action the pistol lashed around in a vicious cut as Rockty crashed into him. The drifter wrenched his shoulder into the arc of the gun, felt the stinging shock of it as the metal cracked into his collar bone. Pain stabbed through him, nearly forcing a scream through his clenched teeth. He bit his lip, locked his fingers around Jason's wrist, and twisted.

A sudden swift intake of breath, and the limp fingers released the weapon. With speed belying his bulk, Jason stepped in, lashed up at Rocky's groin with his right knee. The drifter saw the blow, attempted to leap back, but succeeded only in catching it just below the chest. Bright stars whirled like pinwheels through his head. Gasping for breath, he staggered.

JASON grinned, bored in, cocky, ready for the kill. Rocky remembered his father, remembered the man's fist beating into his face when he had stepped between man and dog. He could see the stubble on the chin, the red-rimmed eyes, could hear the quick gasping of the man's breath. He could remember wishing his father dead as he took the blows.

He blinked, chopped a desperate, side-of-the-palm cut at Jason's wrist as the long left sang past his ear. He connected, felt the bone snap. The short man squealed in anguish.

Releasing all his upsurging hatred, Rocky looped a right that started from his knees. His gnarled fist smashed into Jason's teeth, sent him crumpling to the dust.

Blood trickled from a corner of the stocky man's mouth. Gradually he pushed himself to a sitting position, eyes glassy, shaking his head in disbelief. Spitting blood and dust, he groaned softly.

"Get to your feet before I kick you up," Rocky ordered, voice strained, chest having. He booted the sixgun out of reach. Warily, though still dazed, Jason struggled to his feet. Gradually, comprehension dawned in his eyes. He glared at Rocky.

"This isn't the last of it, mister." He wiped his lips with his good hand, winced as he grasped the other wrist tenderly. "I'll be seeing you again," With a last venomous glance he shuffled down the street, the loud shirt dusty, the hat still lying where it had fallen.

Rocky's eyes held a troubled look. Slowly turning, he strode toward the saloon. A wizened lounger sidled up to him as he approached the 'wings.

"You picked the wrong one for arguing, mister."

"Everyone's a bad customer when it comes to a fight," Rocky's smile was lopsided.

"But *he's* sure the wrong one to tangle with 'round here." The wrinkled face looked up at him, toothless gums working. The squeaky voice continued: "Like as not you'll find him waiting...sometime...when you step out a doorway."

"Don't worry, pop," Rocky grunted as they leaned on the half-empty bar. "Gun slinging's my game."

"Not worried about your ability, son." The old man hawked, spat toward a handy spittoon, missed by inches. "But I can sure see you don't know much about these parts." He turned toward the bartender. "Whiskey, two glasses."

Turning to Rocky. "That was Ralph Jason you tangled with." He licked his dry lips. "You found out quick he's the slimiest buzzard in the territory. His old man's no better.

"The biggest cattleman in these parts, John Jason," he added confidentially.

The bartender slid a bottle and glasses in front of them, wiped a spot of dampness with a dirty rag.

"You're a dead 'un if you ever get Old Man Jason riled at you," the barman muttered.

Rocky flipped a coin to the bar. "Isn't there any law around here?" he raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Jason's the law," the old man snickered. "If you know what's good for you, you'll move out pronto."

Pouring two drinks, he raised his glass to eye level. Squinting long and hard at Rocky over the rim, he tossed down the whiskey. He hawked, spat again, then shambled away.

THE DRIFTER lifted his glass and stared at the amber liquid. Funny how things work out, the thought struck him all at once. His father had died, and he had left Wyoming. He drifted from one job to another, never sticking, always moving. Then, after the shooting, he knew it was in earnest. He'd keep moving until they planted him.

He shrugged, gulped down the fiery liquor. The off-key pounding of a piano drifted over to him, intermixed with the low rumble of voices at the bar. Rocky looked up, a dim fear ghosting along his spine. He could feel a thin line of coolness as a blob of sweat rolled slowly down his back.

Gradually, the noise in the room retreated to the far recesses of his consciousness. He stared at the bright outline of the doorway, cut by the motionless batwings. Thin streamers of sunlight notched their way in, resting lightly on the rough wooden floor.

He stepped away from the bar, heels tapping softly, holstered six-gun slapping against his thigh. The pulse in his forehead throbbed an insistant warning. He grimaced, not in fear, but rather from the tenseness built up within him.

There was danger out there. Instinctively, like a dog sensing an enemy, he knew it. His caution, schooled by countless scraps with sudden death, whispered to him to leave by the back way. He struck out fiercely at the thought.

This was how it was meant to be, a voice whispered hollowly in his brain. He laughed to himself woodenly, the sound barely escaping through his taut lips. No one would make him turn tail anymore, he decided stubbornly. He would ride out of Mesa City alive, taking his own good time, or he would lie still in the dust, waiting for the scavengers.

At the door he halted. Pushing at a 'wing cautiously, he peered through the crack. The street was empty, as far as he could see. Palm patted against leather holster, moved to the butt of the gun. It had a reassuring feeling.

Slamming the 'wing open, he slipped outside as silently as a wraith. The street was deserted. The frontier always recognized trouble. Some intangible feeling seemed to warn people of danger.

His horse nickered gently from the rail. Right hand cocked close to his side, eyes whipping to every possible ambush point, he stepped warily along the board sidewalk.

A slug tugged at his shirt at the same instant he heard the shot. In a fluid motion he leaped to the slim protection of a doorway.

His eyes raked the street, lithe muscles tensing beneath his denims as he crouched, pantherlike. Another slug bit splinters inches from his face. His gun leaped into his hand as he spotted the ambusher. He could see the brim of a Stetson as the man peered from the protection of a building diagonally across the street.

Rocky waited tensely, body partially exposed to lead. A muscle in his cheek ticked once uncontrollably. The ambusher's arm jerked up, a bit more of his face was exposed. The drifter flattened as another slug whined uncomfortably close.

Then his hand moved in a flickering motion, his gun bucked once. A figure staggered from behind the wall

of the building, twisting grotesquely, then slumped to the ground like a rag doll flung carelessly from the hand of a child.

Rocky holstered his gun and somberly moved to the body. The slug had made a bloody pulp of the features of Ralph Jason. The drifter dug his nails into his palms savagely, turned away. Tired resignation replaced the fierce anger that had burned within him. Like buzzards circling a dead steer, men drifted toward the corpse.

From the saloon doorway, the toothless old man watched him.

"You sure knew what you were talking about, pop."

The old man tightened his lips against his gums, switched his gaze to the body. "Take my advice, son," he rasped finally. "If you value your health, get moving." He spat in the dust and turned on his heel.

"Just a minute," Rocky grated, irritation edging his voice. The old man halted in mid stride. "You can tell whoever wants me I'll be in the Stockman's Hotel."

Shaking his head slowly, the old man walked off without a backward glance.

ROCKY'S head ached fiercely as he lay on the hard bed. The picture of the gunfight still stood out vividly in his mind four hours later. He tried to banish it by recalling childhood memories. One by one they sprang before his eyes, those wonderful days in the rolling hills of Wyoming, when his father wasn't mean drunk...when his mother was alive. The cool stream to splash around in, the light breeze kiting through the cottonwoods. Lord! why did it have to turn out this way.

A light tap at the door roused him. Swinging lithely to his feet, he moved toward the panel. Flattening to the wall beside the thin wood, he drew his gun.

"Who's that?" he grunted.

"It is I, *senor,*" came a low voice. "The one you aided this morning."

Rocky covered the door with his gun. He hesitated a fraction of a second. If it were a trap, he knew, he didn't stand a fighting chance. He gambled on the risk, leaned over and twisted the key.

"Come," he answered.

The knob turned and the panel slowly opened. The Mexican stared at the gun, his liquid black eyes puzzled, then shifted his gaze to Rocky's face. There were still traces of dried blood on the old man's features.

Waving him in, the drifter peered cautiously into the dim hallway. Grunting in satisfaction, he kicked the door shut, locked it. He turned to his visitor, a question in his eyes.

"I wish to thank you, *senor,* for helping me," the old man began, his eyes boring into Rocky's.

"Never could stand snakes."

The dark man inclined his head slightly. "You are a gentleman," he said. "There are not many, in this territory."

Rocky grinned derisively. "Okay, mister, a gentleman. Now, what brings you up here?" he continued. "It wasn't just to thank me."

"Es verdad. I came to warn you there is not much time left." His soft voice quickened, a note of fear crept in. "I...work for the elder Jason." His fists balled as he talked. *"Senor,* when he heard of the death of his only son, he swore a terrible oath of vengeance. He swore on the Holy Book that he will personally hang you from the nearest tree, even if he must follow you to the end of the earth."

The room was still for a long moment. The low buzzing of a fly was faintly audible.

The Mexican stepped forward, a tense look on his drawn countenance. "He is like a mad bull when aroused, *senor.* He will give up everything until he had tracked you down and seen you kicking from the end of a..."

Rocky's voice cut in harshly. "I don't scare easy. Tell your boss I'm not moving till I'm ready." Then slowly, deliberately: "Tell him to come and get me."

He strode to the door, his nostrils flaring in anger.

"Wait," the Mexican called hastily. "You do not understand. If he knew

I warn you, he would shoot me like a dog." His eyes slitted, lips narrowed against his white teeth. "I have no love for that family. Everyone hates Jason, for good reason. Even his son hated him." He hesitated a brief moment. "But the boy was his heir. So he will kill you." He said this calmly, as if reciting a grocery list.

"You wonder, *senor?*" he continued. Then quietly: "My daughter. She was the boy's mother...She did not live long..."

Rocky stared incredulously. The Mexican shook his head, managed a slight smile. "I do not blame you. He was all bad. But because his father made him so, he was bad. Not from my Maria."

The silence hung like an impenetrable curtain. Finally, Rocky cleared his throat. "I appreciate all you're doing for me," he said softly. "But I'll take my chances with any man."

"*Senor,*" the Mexican answered with a start, as if awakening from a dream. His voice held a desperate note. "He comes with ten of his *vaqueros.* You do not stand a chance against such numbers." He spread his hands impatiently. "I beg of you. Go while there is still time."

Rocky's eyes narrowed as he stared at the man. It was true. He could never get out alive facing such odds. And he would stand alone. Nobody in this godforsaken hole would stand with him. They were browbeaten by Jason.

He'd have to run again. The words mocked him. Run! Run! Run! They fluttered around in his brain while he stabbed at them futilely. He laughed derisively. True to form, he thought.

Finally he answered, his voice level, no trace of emotion edging past the steel exterior. "How soon will they be here?"

The Mexican shrugged. "I rode as fast I was able."

Rocky grabbed his hat from the bureau, stepped to the door, unlocked and opened it in one swift motion. He walked out, the old man trotting to keep up with his long stride.

Downstairs, they moved cautiously for the front door. The desk clerk watched curiously for a moment, then went back to his work. The Mexican peered out the front, stepped out. He glanced cautiously up and down the street. Satisfied, he motioned to Rocky. The drifter slipped outside, dashed to his horse at the rail. He vaulted to the saddle.

Rocky leaned over and took the reins from the old man. He looked down, a half smile on his tight lips.

"Here's hoping we meet again, pardner." He reached down, offered his hand. The Mexican grasped it eagerly, gripped it tightly for a long moment.

"*Gracias, amigo,*" his voice broke, eyelids blinked rapidly. "I hope we shall meet again, sometime..."

A FLURRY of hoofbeats broke into his words. A band of horsemen burst into the far end of the street, kicking up a cloud of chalky dust. A tall, heavily built individual, riding easily in the saddle, headed the group.

The Mexican gasped, spun around. "Go, *amigo,*" he yelled, running with surprising speed toward the riders.

Rocky pulled at the reins, kicked his horse savagely. He turned his head as he pounded away. The Mexican had whipped a short pistol from under his skirt. The old man halted, raised his gun. It snapped once, almost a futile sound among the clatter of hooves.

A fusillade of lead from the onsweeping horde staggered him, sent him slumping slowly to the ground.

Rocky cursed fluently, snatched at his gun. The Mexican lay in the dirt, twitching like a rabbit caught in a hail of buckshot. The lead rider pounded up. He stopped, stared down at the form for an instant, then shot him through the guts.

The drifter's brain exploded in hate, a blood-red mist obscured his vision. He snapped up his gun, the sights fixed on the lead rider. As he pressed the trigger, the swaying horse jounced his hand. The slug caught another man, knocking him kicking to the ground.

(Continued On Page 93)

SMILIN' BILLY RIDES WITH CURLY BILL

by HAROLD PREECE
(author of "The Hanging at Snuff-Box Church-House")

Smilin' Billy Breakenridge was a lawman and Curly Bill Brocius an outlaw, but the lawman of the old west rarely had any personal grudge against outlaws. So there was no reason why lawman and outlaw couldn't get together on a friendly mission when the badge-packer had no particular charge to press in the line of duty.

TOMBSTONE called him Smilin' Billy Breakenridge. He smiled at the punchers he locked up to sober up; most of them claimed it was plumb pleasant to be arrested by him. And if he had to send a man boots on to Boothill, he smiled when he did it.

This morning in 1881, he was smiling at his namesake, Curly Bill Brocius, boss outlaw of the San Simon Valley. Every man of that robbers' roost called Galeyville had turned out to see the meeting of those two in the settlement's top gambling house.

They stood facing each other at the bar. Smilin' Billy had bought the drinks. Now, he was answering the sharp questions of the handsome, curly-headed gun-slinger. "How many men come with you, Deputy? And where are they holin' up?

"Nobody, Curly—just me and myself. Man don't bring an army when he's paying a sociable visit.

"Galeyville's kind of particular about its visitors, Deputy—'specially when they come wearin' stars."

"Oh that," Smilin' Billy's fingernail flicked a dust speck off the star on his shirt. "Been wearin' it so long I'd feel downright naked without it."

Curly Bill's face thawed a little. His mouth opened in a slight grin. "Smart answer, deputy," he drawled. "Maybe the right answer—maybe not."

"There's a lot o' reward money out on us fellers." He waved his glass toward the crowd in the gambling house. "Maybe, Billy, you got the notion of collectin' it."

You could feel the hot silence in the room as the crowd waited for Smilin' Billy to speak. Smilin' Billy drained his glass, looked Curly Bill straight in the eyes, and said cheerfully: "Nope, didn't come collecting reward money. Come collecting taxes."

A roar of laughter swept the room. Outlaws plopped down at tables and laughed till they cried. The bartender was so tickled that he dropped a bottle of fancy whiskey on the floor and it sopped into the wood, unnoticed. A swarthy Mexican wearing a big sombrero, embroidered with flowers, laughed a long deep belly laugh. Curly Bill doubled up over the bar and his sides shook. Every time, he looked at Smilin' Billy, just standing and smiling, he started laughing again. Then he stood up, nodded his head briskly until he could control himself, and sang out across the room:

"All right, you fellers, shut up that cacklin' and fork over. If this feller's got the gall to come to Galeyville and collect taxes, we got the gall to pay 'em. Come on up here, you cussed cow-rustlers and bank histers. Shell out, you stage robbin' sons o' guns. We done beat Arizona Territory out of our necks; but we ain't beatin' it out o' no money."

A True Fact Story

Breakenridge smiled when he sent outlaws to Boothill.

The first one who sauntered up was the swarthy caballero. He plunked down two twenties and a ten on the bar. Curly Bill's hand reached out and gripped the Mexican's wrist in an iron vise.

"You'll have to raise the ante on that, Pedro," he said in a hard even tone. "If you cheat on taxes like you cheat on poker, I'll be sendin' you back across the Rio Grande where pickin's is slimmer. Two hundred'll be about right for you."

"Si, senor," the Mexican said hastily. He peeled off a hundred and a fifty. One by one, the other hard-bitten citizens of Galeyville came forward and put down whatever amount that Curly Bill decreed.

"Reckon this'll straighten me up on your books," the outlaw said when the last man had come across. He pulled out two one thousand bills and laid them on the pile.

The biggest smile that anybody had ever seen was on Smilin' Billy's face as he scooped up the cash. "Thanks, boys," he said. "County's in the red mighty bad. Sheriff Johnny Behan's been hopping mad about all this tax money being out over here in San Simon Valley."

Then he turned to Curly Bill. "But this is just part of the job. Now I got to collect the rest of the taxes in the Valley. Being as you know everybody around here, Curly, I figured you'd like to ride with me and help do the collecting."

Curly Bill's jaw dropped at that. He swallowed hard, poured Smilin' Billy another drink out of a bottle,

and then filled his own glass. Before he could find words to answer, Smilin' Billy pulled another star out of his pocket. He pinned it on Curly Bill. "Raise up your right hand, Curly Bill Brocius. I'm swearing you in as a special deputy sheriff to collect taxes."

Curly Bill's hand shot up. He repeated after Smilin' Bill the words of the deputy's oath. Then he took out his big red bandana and wiped his face. "If anybody had of ever told me, I'd be a deputy sheriff," he said kind of dazed. "If anybody had ever told me that there'd be such a critter in Galeyville as a deputy sheriff—" He looked at himself in the mirror behind the big bar. He saw the star reflected in the glass and thumbed it like a child inspecting a trinket. Then somebody called out: "I swear, Curly, you sure look a whole lot better with that star wrapped on your chest then you'll look some of these days with a rope wrapped around your neck."

That broke the spell. Everybody had a big laugh and a big drink with Deputy Sheriff Curly Bill Brocius setting 'em up.

* * *

BRIGHT AND early the next morning, Smilin' Billy and Curly Bill were saddled up for the long ride across San Simon Valley. "Might as well have a mornin' bracer 'fore we git goin'," said Curly Bill. They got down and stepped into the booze and faro palace. At that moment, a man walked in carrying a tin bucket of water. Mockingly, he picked up a glass from the bar, dipped it in the bucket, and saluted the two.

"Here's wishin' you good ridin', deputies," he said.

Another man rose from where he had been lying on top of a card table. A gun barked out, shattering the glass.

"Ned, ain't I told you before about drinkin' that pizen," the man on the table called. "Reckon this'll learn you."

"Reckon you're right, Jim," the man with the bucket chuckled. "Except you could use some of that pizen to clean up your face."

A third man rushed in. "Jim, damn it," he roared. "Your hoss is dead outside. Dropped down like a potted pigeon when a bullet comin' from in here killed him."

Everybody rushed outside. The bullet had crashed through the frame wall after smashing the glass. And Jim's horse lay dead as a tribute to Jim's marksmanship.

"Hell," said Jim to Ned. "Serves me right for hornin' in.

"Oughta let you gone ahead and pizened yourself."

"Killin' that good hoss'll cost you ten bucks more in taxes, Jim," Curly Bill said, holding out his hand. The trigger man produced the ten spot. As the two deputies rode away, Smilin' Billy looked back to see Pedro, the caballero, gazing evilly at them.

For two weeks, they rode across the yucca and mesquite jungles of San Simon Valley. Curly Bill led him up dim trails that led to outlaw roosts of tents and plankboard shacks. And as they put the miles behind them, Smilin' Billy's saddle bags were busting open with bills and bullion.

One man argued stubbornly with them. "Curly, have you plumb lost your senses," he growled. "Wearin' a deputy's star and collectin' taxes to build gallows that'll hang us all."

Curly Bill laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. "Blast you, Bob," he said, "when it comes, I'd rather be strung up from the gallows proper-like with a preacher sayin' a prayer over me than be swingin' like a dead dog from a mesquite tree. So would you. Reckon you're owin' five hundred. Just hand it to Smilin' Billy there and he'll write out your receipt. Which one o'f your names you want it made out to?"

Afterwards, they hit a deep secluded canyon.

"We're seein' a man," he said, "who's brought in a big herd o' cattle from Mexico. And he'll be payin' a right smart of taxes.

Smilin' Billy threw back his head and laughed. "Arizona taxes on steers stole from Mexico," he said.

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The Decoy

By E. E. CLEMENT

Killer Kubilius was hiding out, right in plain sight, for a very special reason!

THERE'S twenty men, none of them true and damn few, if any, good, all of them beating the brush for Killer Kubilius' scalp; descending like the wolf-pack they are upon every hoeman and small rancher in the county; talking up their brags; grabbing chuck, fresh horses, red-eye, tobacco, and everything else they can take from timorous folk—and where is their quarry? Sitting at a broken-down piano in Ben Ellen's *Palace*, a pitcher of beer at his elbow and a quirly stuck in his lips, trying to pick out a tune.

"Dang thing's drivin' me loco," the killer says as he gulps down another glass of beer and wipes his lips with his sleeve. He's a tall thin one, this Kubilius, light-haired, and sorrowful-looking. Gets a dreamy look in his eyes every now and then, like he's trying to see across the world to the old country, I reckon—though he don't talk about it none. Some gents have mistook that dreamy and sorrowful attitude, and you can read their obituaries in various boothills around the country; they drew first, but it didn't help them a bit. Which is how Kubilius got the rep of killer.

"Can't sleep o' nights," he mourns. This tune starts goin' around inside my skull and then it stops and I disremember how it ends.... Lookin' for me, are they? Mebbeso I'll still be here when they've et all the dust in Rainbow and come back draggin' their tails, huh?" He takes another swipe at the piano and someone says, "By grab, that there keyboard ain't goin' t' sit still and take beatin', from you forever, Killer. Sometime it's goin' to swipe back atcha, mark my words."

Kubilius' right hand sort of drifts toward his gun butt and the heckler shuts down pronto; ain't no one here cares to see how close they can come to shootin' second, nohow we like the Killer. Damn sight better human that what passes for law and order in these parts; the sheriff's nothin' but a fancy errand-boy for the big ranchers, who don't care a hoot in hades about what happens to folk in general so long's their own interests are protected—which same Larson manages to do. That is, when he and his ragtag, bounty-hunting posse aren't ridin' down anyone at all who's likely to bring a reward when delivered on a shutter.

Ben's daughter Mary, who has at least a dozen cowboys simultaneously plottin' to commit matrimony, and her dodgin' the lot of them but bein' friends nohow, comes up with a fresh pitcher of beer, and says, "You aren't going to let them take you? You didn't bushwhack that cattle-buyer and steal his money."

Kubilius goes into the beginning of the tune—which we can all whistle in our sleep by now, having heard it at least a thousand times (though I suppose you'd call it variations, since the killer can't seem to remember exactly where the notes were the last time he found them)—and we figger if he don't go loco pretty soon, we will. Then he looks up at Mary Ellen, only he's more like looking through her, and says, "Nope. Never bushwhacked anyone in my life. I take mine while they're lookin' at

me, with their hands up."

"But they say you're the boss of the Canyon bunch." Mary Ellen's mighty concerned and her bosom's moving up and down fast. "They say you've done awful things, and you'll be hanged—maybe lynched."

"That's downright annoyin'" remarks Kubilius. "Yuh know, I almost had it this time."

Over at a table, a gent who's somehow, managed to sleep durin' the concert lifts up his head. "The Canyon bunch is operatin' somewheres in this part of the country, I hear tell."

"I ride alone," states the killer. He glances at Mary Ellen for an instant, almost as if he's seein' her, and says, "Knew a gal once who looked a lot like you."

Mary don't act like she's bein' complimented much. She sort of tosses her shoulders, and walks away like she's plenty mad. The gent who just spoke up—some pilgrim driftin' through—gets up and ambles over to the piano. "That there tune sounds sort of familiar to me," he allows. "What's she called?"

"Dunno," says the killer.

"Too bad," sighs the pilgrim. "But if it's the end of it that's slipped your mind, maybe so I can remember it." He rubs his stubbled chin for a second, then starts to whistle. "Somethin' like this."

Kubilius frowns, then shakes his head. "Nope."

"Naw, that ain't it exactly. But it was somethin' like that.... Lemme try again, now." He licks his lips and contemplates the pitcher of beer. "If'n you don't mind my wettin' my whistle a bit; it's got sort of dusty."

"Sure, help yourself."

The pilgrim stares at the ceiling, and in a sort of absent minded way picks up the pitcher and tilts back his head. When he finally stops for breath, there's maybe enough left for a fly to drown in—if it was a sickly fly that couldn't stand gettin' damp, that is.

"Maybe you need a bit more to help your memory," suggests the killer. We watch these goin's-on, figuring that the pilgrim had better remember that tune now, for his own sake as well as everyone else's. Kubilius ain't never shot a man in cold blood, far's we know; but sometimes a gent can get irritated to the point where he don't realize what he's doin', and the killer has that dreamy look about him now that spells trouble. He calls for Mary, and she comes back with another pitcher, still lookin' put out. Hard to tell but what maybe she's tryin' to keep from cryin'; it's dang hard to figure the she-stuff, whether it runs on four legs or two. "You fool," she says as she sets the full pitcher down and picks up the empty.

The pilgrim reaches for it, but Kubilius takes hold of the gent's arm. "Maybe you ought to try to remember first." He pours himself a glass of beer and starts drinkin' it slow, looking as if he was a sitting duck.

"Yeah...well, y'know, that snifter did sort of help," the gent opines. "Let's see, now..." He squints out the window, then whistles something and the killer's hand comes down flat on the pilgrim's back with a slap that sounds like a pistol shot.

"That's it, pardner!" He turns to the piano and plays the tune-from beginning to end—well sort of—only stopping and starting again four-five times when he hit a wrong note. Maybe it't a pretty tune, I dunno by this time; I just don't want to hear it again, even if it's good. Before the gent can claim his reward, Mary Ellen lets out a scream. "They're coming back!"

SHE GRABS hold of Kubilius. "They'll hang you—you've got to get out of here, quick! I'll show you the way..."

But the killer is shaking his head and pushing her aside. "No, Miss Ellen," he drawls, "I'm right anxious to meet up with the sheriff." Before she can plead with him further, Larson and four-five of his posse shoulder their way in. Larson stares like he's seein' a ghost, and Kubilius is just standin' there while the pilgrims has picked up the pitcher anyway and is about to take another sample.

"Kubilius! Grab for a piece of sky,

you polecat; I'm arrestin' you fer murder, armed robbery, and ramroddin' that Canyon bunch of varmints!"

The killer says quietly to the pilgrim, "Is this the one?"

There's five guns covering the two of them, and Kubilius acts like he never saw a gun before and don't know what it's supposed to do. Then the pilgrim moves so fast we think maybe it was lightnin'. He shoves that pitcher of beer head first into Larson's face and the sheriff is suddenly drenched and covered with foam, while the unknown has dropped down behind the piano and snapped a couple of shots at the posse. The rest of us find that we can move pretty fast in a crisis, too; we make for under the tables and behind the bar where the lead isn't so likely to come our way.

It's a mite hard to see under these circumstances, but I can tell that Kubilius has his guns out, and there's a shootin' spree goin' on—which same don't last too long, seein' as how the ragtag sidin' the sheriff had breaks for the great outdoors as soon as their quarry fights back. That is, most of them; there's one on the floor, ready for the skypilot to say last words over, and one sittin' down holding on to a busted arm. It's mostly cordite stink in the place, then Larson hollerin' that he gives up.

We decide it ain't no longer necessary to prove that discretion is the better part of stayin' alive, and we come out in time to hear Kubilius say, "You got your boots mixed up, Larson." He reaches into his breast pocket and takes out a badge, tosses it onto the table. "By my authority as federal marshal, I'm takin' you into custody, and I'm charging you with the actions you just spoke of yourself. And my witness here can prove that you murdered a woman six months ago."

The pilgrim nods. "That's the one, all right." He walks over to the piano, sits down, and we are assailed with the beginning of that dang tune again—just the beginning, because he hasn't played very much of it before

(Continued On Page 90)

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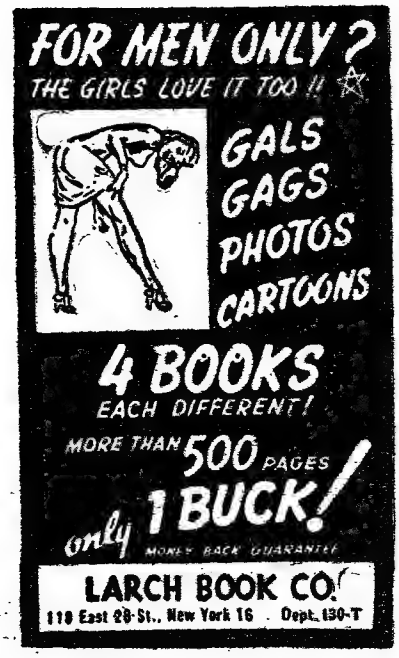

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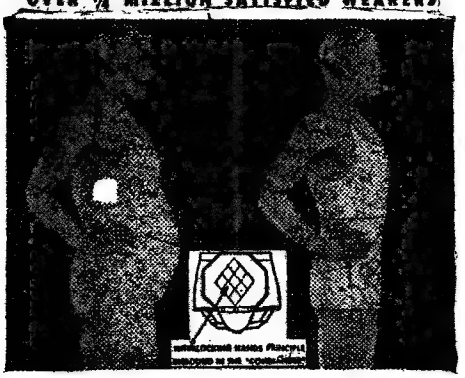

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COMPLETE COWBOY NOVEL MAGAZINE

(Continued From Page 89)

Larson, hollers, "No! For gawd's sake don't play that. I can't stand it!"

"Y'see," explains the killer, "Colby here didn't see the renegades very well. They knocked him out and tied him up, but when he came to he heard Julie playing this tune on the piano; they were masked, and their voices were muffled, but he could hear her playing, and hear her screaming for help before they killed her. Then they set fire to the house, but Colby managed to get away in time...

"We figured that this tune would be something that the leader of the Canyon bunch couldn't stand hearing and he'd give himself away if he did hear it. Didn't know for sure whether Larson was our man, or whether it was someone else around town here; we were pretty sure he was around town."

"So you're a lawman," I says to Kubilius.

"I offered to help the law this once, playin' the part of decoy." He picked up the badge and pinned it on his chest. "And I'll stick to this commission until the job is finished. We still have to round up the rest of the Canyon bunch. Maybe Larson will help us.... After all, without any law here except me, and with me being occupied, Larson might not exactly be safe in his own jail unless he cooperated."

The ex-sheriff snorted. "What the hell for; I'm goin' tuh be hung anyhow."

Kubilius finished his beer. Y'know, I've heard tell about lynchers who figured that hangin' was too good for some crimes. Figured that a more lingerin' punishment was called for. Strictly illegal, you understand, but when there's no law around, sometimes these sort of things are done and gotten away with.... And something tells me I'll be unpinning this badge once you're locked up and turning it over to someone else—when that gent arrives, of course."

Mary Ellen said, "But you're not going back to..."

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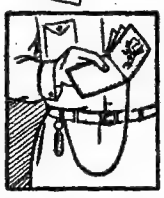

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THE DECOY

(Continued From Page 90)

Kubilius smiled, sorrowful-like "A man takes one road and there's no turning back. Someday maybe I'll meet someone who can shoot faster, or who's lucky, or maybe I'll dance on air." He looked at Larson. "Could be that I might have changed my life, only, only..."

Then that dreamy look was back in his eyes and he was passing his guns over to the pilgrim. "Keep us covered, Colby; I'm going to question the prisoner right now... Put up your dukes, Larson."

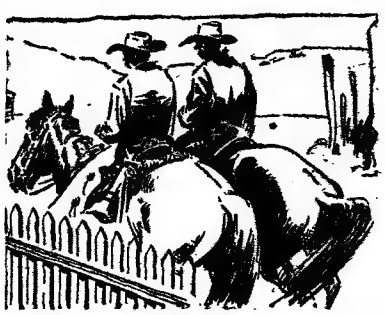
The one-time sheriff showed all the bravery we'd come to expect from him; he made a feeble stab at fighting back, then howled like a whipped dog as Kubilius went after him. Larson had never been a good-looking hombre, but he was decidedly poorer looking without most of his teeth and his face puffed up like a rattler had bit him. He lay on the floor and whimpered.

Kubilius lifted a boot, then put it down. "What the hell, this won't bring back the dead.... Colby, you ride out and get Marshal Bledsoe; I'll keep things straight until you get back."

"Then you're leaving?" asked Mary Ellen.

"Sure... They say there's gold up in Alaska. Reckon I'll look up Buckskin Frank Leslie and see if'n he'd like to go prospectin'. Hear tell he's feelin' sort of bored with things these days."

THE END



THE DEAD LAUGH LAST

(Continued From Page 83)

The lead rider looked up in surprise, shouted to his men. Spurring their mounts, the band pounded after Rocky. The drifter ducked low in the saddle, kicked his horse. The little animal spurted forward.

* * *

The trail led through rough foot hills, paralleling a swift, narrow river. The riders pressed close behind him, an occasional shot whining uncomfortably close.

The horse gradually tired. He could feel its labored breathing matching his own.

Only a matter of a couple of hours, his thoughts whispered, before they run you down. Maybe less, Rock boy. Then you'll decorate the sunset from the end of a rope. This is the way you knew it would end, didn't you, Rocky? Didn't you...didn't you...

The mount stumbled at a treacherous turn and threw him. Unhurt, he leaped for the milling animal, grasped the saddlehorn. As he swung back on his horse, the pursuers drummed around the bend, guns flaming in staccato thunder. A sharp, knife-like pain lanced into his side. Swaying, he felt his brain reel with the rhythm of the horse's stride. Fire bathed him in agony, gradually cooling to a blessed numbness. The gallant animal tapped a hidden reserve of strength, surged ahead.

* * *

The rider lay forward on the horse, his breath coming shallow and fast, his eyes glazed, skin stretched taut over his cheekbones. Blood dripped from the ugly hole in his side; his life ebbed with each spurt of gore.

With a supreme effort he pushed himself erect in the saddle and twisted around. The riders back on the rough trail danced in his blurred vision. His eyes narrowed as he gauged

(Continued On Page 94)

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(Continued From Page 93)

their distance. Suddenly he swung forward and with a low, animal snarl, dug his heelds into the side of his straining horse. The game little mount spurted along the trail.

He slumped in the saddle like a sack of wheat. His hands, gripping the reins until the knuckles showed white, slowly relaxed and slipped from the leather. The horse plunged forward unheeded.

Skidding at a sharp turn, the animal reared in fright. Rocky, half-conscious, spun from its back. He landed with a smashing jar in a clump of underbrush, yards away from a narrow, almost invisible crevice in the bare rock surrounding him. Free of its rider, the horse plunged into the swift-moving river, headed out of sight.

He was dimly aware of the riders pulling to a halt on the trail a few feet away. He knew he was unseen, bit his lips to stifle a groan.

John Jason gnawed at his scraggly white mustache as he peered down at the scuffled tracks.

"He jumped his horse into the river, boys," he spoke harshly. "He don't fool me. Half of you cut across, and we'll follow him downstream. He won't get away from a Jason."

Rocky's cracked lips stretched in a smile. He could hear the voice of the old Mexican, as if from some great distance.

"He will never rest until he has hanged you. He will follow you to the ends of the earth. He will never rest...never rest..."

Rocky laughed, a shuddering, racking sound. He dragged himself toward the crevice, slowly...slowly...

★ ★ ★

SMILIN' BILLY RIDES WITH CURLY BILL

(Continued From Page 86)

"Wouldn't the border customs outfit like that? But the county needs cash. Lead me to it."

They rode into a camp where a dozen hard-faced men were busy branding mavericks or busy changing brands on bellowing steers. "Fellows," Curly Bill announced, "this is Deputy Billy Breakenridge out hustlin' taxes. Now us good peaceful citizens know we can't keep this county goin' without ever' gent payin' his share to keep it goin'. And Deputy Curly Bill's ought to see that we all do our part as good citizens."

The rustlers looked pretty mad when they shelled out. But they paid up.

* * *

NEXT NIGHT, the taxes were all collected. Smilin' Billy and Curly Bill made their last camp under the forbidding Chircahua Mountains. Smilin' Billy felt something tight in his throat as they laughed and joked over the fat young jackrabbit that Curly Bill had shot and fried up for supper.

"Curly," he said, "I never rode with a man I like better than you. Ever think of giving up what you been doing, and settling down to something better? I'd sure hate to come back shooting at you."

The outlaw puffed on his pipe a long minute. Then he kicked at a burning stick that had fallen out of the fire. "It's like this, Billy," he finally answered. "You told me about runnin' away from Wisconsin when you was sixteen. You been out here nineteen years, and you done took up with one kind of crowd. I reckon you'll stay with it."

Curly Bill's voice was a little bit husky. "I ran away from home when I was a kid, too," he said. "I took up with a crowd but it was a different one. I have to stay with it; that's the way the chips fall for a man."

"And, Billy, if you ever come shootin' at—me—."

"Well, that's what we been collectin' them taxes for—to pay you for doin' your duty."

When morning came, they were

(Continued On Page 96)

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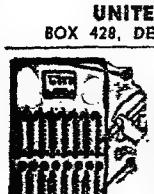

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COMPLETE COWBOY NOVEL MAGAZINE

(Continued From Page 95)

silent over their bacon and coffee. After breakfast, neither wanted to make the first move to break company. Finally, Curly Bill took off his star and handed it silently to Smilin' Billy. Then the two shook hands with a few awkward words and rode in different directions—Curly Bill to break the law and Smilin' Billy to enforce the law.

Smilin' Billy cut back through Sulphur Springs Valley, after leaving San Simon, and headed toward Tombstone. As he neared the county seat, he began feeling that he was being trailed from both sides of the road. Suspicion troubled him. Had this been Curly Bill's way of letting him collect a big sum of cash that would be histed later? Had he, a deputy sheriff, been taken in by the king outlaw of Arizona?

At a bend in the trail, he saw a horseman wearing a Mexican sombrero blocking his way. He slowed up and recognized the bandit, Pedro.

Smilin' Billy drew out his pistol and advanced cautiously. He could see the Mexican reaching for his gun.

Then from the other side of the road, a lone horseman flashed out. The rider's gun hit the Mexican square in the middle of the forehead. Pedro, the cut-throat, fell dead across a cactus patch.

The horseman turned, waved his hand to Smilin' Billy and was gone. The deputy never knew who he was, but he knew who had sent him.

Curly Bill had helped collect that tax money. And he was going to see that it got where it was intended.

(Continued From Page 77)

cropping out in him, Orin, but it wasn't that. And though I hate to say anything reflecting on a fellow-practioner—still, we all make mistakes.

"The plain truth of the matter is that when Ray was in that accident, back before you left the county, Orin, he was hurt worse than he or Emery ever guessed. He fell on his head, and there was an injury to his skull. A slight pressure of the bone on an area of the brain—I'll not go into the medical phrases, but what it means is that this continuing pressure affected him. To the point where it not only changed his whole disposition, but induced criminal tendencies. As I say, I suspected this. And when he was so battered in that fight the other night, and I was called in, I verified my suspicion."

He paused, cleared his throat. "It was a delicate operation, and rather dangerous. But once I was counted a good surgeon, and with him unconscious anyway—I decided that I might as well risk a complete cure as half a one. I operated to relieve that pressure. Already you can see the effect, restoring him to his normal self. He'll be a real Locke from now on, and a husband, Miss Reta, that you can be proud of."

"And you, old friend," Locke said softly. "Are a success in your career. You can be proud, too."

"Well, I feel more like a man than I have for quite a while, and that's a fact," Bannon conceded.

Reta was twisting her hands in her lap. With a doctor's practised eye, Bannon crossed to her.

"I think I'll give you a pill so that you'll get a good sleep for yourself, Reta," he said gently. "This has been hard on you—especially the news about your father. But don't take it too hard."

SHE RAISED a strained face to him. "That's bad enough—though in a way, I'm almost glad," she whispered. "This way—he's safe!"

"Safe? What do you mean?" Bannon questioned.

"I mean—he and Steele were partners," she explained. "I think that Orin knew it. I—didn't, not till last night. Though I'd had some dreadful suspicions. But last night, knowing that you'd probably be coming back for me, Orin—I was afraid of what might happen at the ranch, with everybody gone. So I took some of Dad's valuable papers."

She was silent a moment, fighting for composure. Then she went on.

"I'd never seen any of them before—and I didn't intend to look then, only just enough to be sure that I got what should be taken. But there was something on one—and it made me look at others. I knew—then. And the worst of it, Orin—and you too, Jinny—it was all a steal, the Three Sevens. There never was a mortgage—that was all faked. Oh—you'll all hate me—Ray won't want me when he knows—"

"Ray does want you," Ray's voice came in contradiction from the other room. "There's nothing wrong with *your* record, sweetheart—which is more than can be said for mine—"

"Of course. And nobody will hate you," Locke added sharply. "I'll be mighty proud of my sister-in-law. And if it will make you feel better, as it should, I can tell you that your father was killed because he'd decided to break with Steele and go straight, and Steele knew it."

That brought a measure of comfort. But she was not done.

"The Three Sevens belongs to you, Jinny," she said quietly. "I'll see that you get it back."

Jinny hesitated, looking at Locke. Reading what was in his eyes, she nodded.

"If that's the way you want it, Reta," she agreed. "Orin and I will have the Three Sevens, and you and Ray the Wagon Wheel. It will work out nicely."

That, Locke saw, was something beyond which Reta had thought, but it was as Jinny had said. It would work out nicely. It was sunset outside, but there was a rosy glow of promise across the west.

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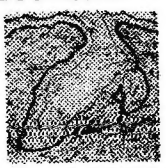
TODAY, it is old-fashioned to neglect skin blemishes when you can instantly *CONCEAL them from sight with the Dornol treatment. At the same time you can be secure in the knowledge that medication is acting to remove externally caused pimples, blackheads, acne, and other skin blemishes.

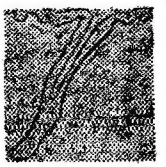
What Dornol's "cover-up" action alone is worth in peace of mind cannot be measured. To be left out of things because friends and associates "can't stand the sight of your skin" is indeed to suffer the tortures of the unwanted and avoided. No longer need prying eyes make you writhe with shame and misery. Now because of the wonderful "cover-up" feature of Dornol you can put your best foot forward . . . *at once!*

MICROSCOPE SHOWS WHAT'S BEHIND THOSE PIMPLES

The microscope can't lie – and its high-powered lenses show your skin covered with dead cells, residue from the sweat glands, and a quantity of oil secreted by the sebaceous glands. A most important factor in skin disorders occurs when thousands of these tiny sebaceous glands discharge more oil than the skin can use for lubrication. Unless special care is given, this oil film attracts foreign matter to your skin much as an oil mop picks up dust. Bacteria and fungi, tiny particles of clothing, bedding, cosmetics – are all external agents which may infect your skin. See the difference between a healthy and pimply skin in the microscopic reproductions below. The 2-way Dornol treatment attacks sick skin with *instant* action! Its detergent penetration cleanses the pores and its clinically proved medication discourages oiliness and kills infectious bacteria which are often associated with externally-caused pimples and blackheads.



Cross section of sick skin from face showing sebaceous gland plugged with drying oil, waste, and bacteria, forming pimples and blackheads.



Cross section of normal healthy skin with sebaceous plug removed. Dornol tends to keep the skin vital and healthy.

DORNOL PRODUCTS, INC. Dept. 2110-A
4257 Katonah Ave., New York 66, N. Y.

TRY DORNOL AT OUR RISK

We know what the Dornol treatment has done for others, so we want you to try it at our risk. A few minutes a day invested in our treatment may yield more gratifying results than you ever dared hope for. This is what we say to you. If you are not delighted in every way by the improved condition and general appearance of your skin in just ten days, simply return the unused portion of the 2 Dornol formulas and we will refund not only the price you paid – but DOUBLE YOUR MONEY BACK! Can anything be fairer than that? You have everything to gain . . . and we take all the risk!

Rush DOUBLE REFUND COUPON Now

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Rush the Dornol Treatment at once in plain wrapper.

☐ On delivery I will pay $1.98 plus postage and C.O.D. charges.

☐ Enclosed find $2 in full payment. You pay all postage.

Unless delighted, I may return the unused portion of Dornol after 10 days and get DOUBLE MY MONEY BACK.

Name .....

Address .....

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DOGGONE! THIS JOB HAS ME LICKED! CAN'T FIGURE HOW TO FIX IT!
LET ME TAKE A CRACK AT IT!
10 MINUTES LATER—
GOLLY! SHE'S PURRIN' LIKE A KITTEN! HOW'D YOU DO IT?
LISTEN, PAL—ANY JOB IS TWICE AS EASY WITH ONE OF MoTOR'S REPAIR MANUALS!

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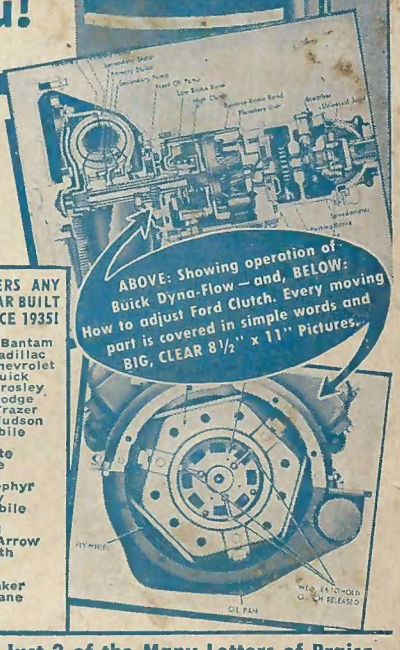

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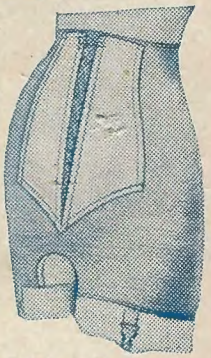

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